10¢

MASKED RIDER WESTERN

MAR.

TRAIL TALK
By FOG HORN CLANCY

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BRIE

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

FEATURING

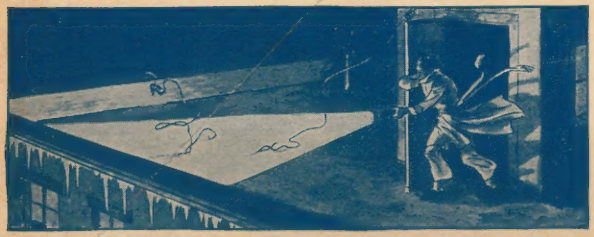
DESERT OF DOOM

A LONG BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL OF THE WILD WEST'S MOST FAMOUS RIDERS OF THE OWL-HOOT TRAIL

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

"I CHEATED DEATH ON A SKYSCRAPER ROOF!"

A true experience of ALLEN H. GIPSON, *New York City*



"ONE BITTERLY COLD NIGHT, my radio went dead," writes Mr. Gipson. "Suspecting that the howling wind had blown down the aerial, I threw on a dressing gown, grabbed my flashlight, and headed for the fifteenth floor roof.

"AN ICY WIND chilled me as I searched for and found the aerial. Making hasty repairs, I started back down. To my horror, I found myself locked out. I battered the door. I shouted. But the wind howled me down.

"NEARLY FROZEN TO DEATH, I had an inspiration. Ripping the aerial loose, I tied the lighted flashlight to it, and swung it over the side of the building. Luckily the light attracted someone in an apartment below. Thanks to those dependable 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries I was saved.

(*Signed*) *Allen H. Gipson*"

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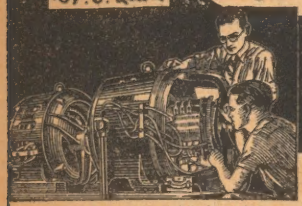
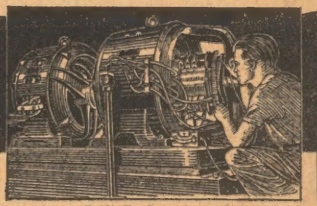
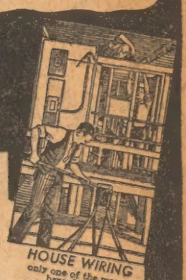


1 FIRST—You are told and shown how to do it.



THEN—You do the job yourself.



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Have you ever dreamed of holding down a steady, good pay job? Have you ever dreamed of doing the work you really like in a job that holds promise of a real future in the years ahead?

Well, we all know that you can't get the good things in life by just dreaming about them. Hundreds of fellows are today holding down mighty fine jobs with prospects of a bright future. They are filling these jobs because they had the foresight to equip themselves with the right kind of training. Most of these men were only average fellows a short time ago, but the proper training helped to lift them out of the low pay ranks of unskilled workers. The same opportunity is now offered to you.

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You will be trained on actual equipment and machinery and because of our method of training, you don't need previous experience or a lot of education. Many of my successful graduates never even completed Grammar School. Here in my school you work on generators, motors, dynamos, you do house wiring, wind armatures and do actual work in many other branches of electricity and right now I'm including valuable instruction in Diesel, Electric Refrigeration and Air Conditioning at no extra cost. Our practical shop methods make it easier to learn—First the instructors tell you how a thing should be done—then they show you how it should be done—then you do the actual work yourself.

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Everything was just as stated in literature. And plenty of instruction so you take care of anything, really glad I enrolled with Coyne training.
J. Hahr, Canada
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Don Hickman, S. Car.

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Send the coupon today for all details. When I get it I'll send you my big free book containing dozens of pictures of students at work in my shops. I'll also tell you about my "Pay After Graduation" plan, how many earn while learning and how we help our students after graduation. Fill in, clip coupon, mail today for your start toward a brighter future.

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• EVERY STORY BRAND-NEW •

10¢ MASKED RIDER WESTERN MAGAZINE

Vol. 10, No. 2 MARCH, 1941 Price, 10c

Wayne Morgan, The Masked Rider

IN

DESERT OF DOOM

A Long Complete Book-Length Novel

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

When the Robin Hood Outlaw Meets Up with a Reign of Violence and Death, His Ready Guns Roar in Lone Battle Against Human Vultures! Follow the Masked Rider as He Matches Wits and Weapons with a Desperate Band of White-Hooded Range Despoilers..... 16

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AND

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MASKED RIDER WESTERN MAGAZINE. Published bi-monthly by Better Publications, Inc., 4600 Diversey Avenue, Chicago, Illinois, executive and editorial offices, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. H. L. Pines, President. Copyright 1941 by Better Publications, Inc. Yearly, 60 cents; single copies, 10 cents. Canadian and foreign, postage extra. Entered as second class matter December 16, 1937, at the post office at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Manuscripts must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution be used, it is a coincidence.

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PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

BUT JIM. I DON'T SEE HOW WE CAN AFFORD TO MARRY ON YOUR LOW PAY
MARY'S RIGHT. I HAVE NO RIGHT TO ASK HER TO MARRY ME ON THE MONEY I'M MAKING.
LOOK HERE. N.R.I. HAS TRAINED HUNDREDS OF MEN LIKE ME TO MAKE GOOD MONEY IN RADIO. I GUESS I'LL GET THAT FREE BOOK
LEARNING RADIO THIS WAY IS ACTUALLY FUN. I'M ALREADY MAKING $5 TO $10 A WEEK IN SPARE TIME. RADIO CERTAINLY OFFERS OPPORTUNITY TO WELL TRAINED TECHNICIANS
YOU CERTAINLY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER
THANKS, YOU SEE, I HAVE TAKEN N.R.I. TRAINING
OH JIM. IT'S WONDERFUL. NOW YOU'RE ON THE WAY TO SUCCESS
YES MARY, AND THERE'S A REAL FUTURE FOR US IN RADIO AND TELEVISION

I Trained These Men

Chief Operator Broadcasting Station

Before I completed your lessons, I obtained my Radio Broadcast Operator's license and immediately joined Station WMPC where I am now Chief Operator.
HOLLIS F. HAYES
327 Madison St.
Lapeer, Michigan

Service Manager for Four Stores

I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N. R. I. I am now Radio service manager for the M..... Furniture Co. for their four stores.
JAMES E. RYAN
119 Pebble Court
Fall River, Mass.

$10 to $20 a Week in Spare Time

I repaired some Radio sets when I was on my tenth lesson. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made $600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of $10 to $20 a week — just spare time.
JOHN JERRY
1529 Arapahoe St., Room 17,
Denver, Colorado

DRAFT REGISTRANTS!

If you ARE called, and are then a Radio Technician, you'll be eligible for a communications branch of the service; in line for technical ratings with extra pay.
If you ARE NOT called, you now have an opportunity to get into Radio at a time when the Government is pouring millions of dollars into the Radio industry to buy Defense equipment, on top of boom civilian Radio business. Either way — it's smart to train for RADIO NOW!

I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME
in your spare time for a
GOOD JOB IN RADIO

J. E. Smith, President
Nat. Radio Inst.
Est. 25 years

If you can't see a future in your present job; feel you'll never make much more money, if you're in a seasonal field, subject to lay offs, IT'S TIME NOW to investigate Radio. Trained Radio Technicians make good money, and you don't have to give up your present job or leave home to learn Radio. I train you at home nights in your spare time.

Why Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Radio broadcasting stations employ operators, technicians. Radio manufacturers employ testers, inspectors, servicemen in good-pay jobs. Radio jobbers, dealers, employ installation and servicemen. Many Radio Technicians open their own Radio sales and repair businesses and make $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week fixing Radios in spare time. Automobile, Police, Aviation, Commercial Radio, Loudspeaker Systems, Electronic Devices are other fields offering opportunities for which N. R. I. gives the required knowledge of Radio. Television promises to open good jobs soon.

Many Make $5 to $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets—start showing you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your Course I send plans and directions which have helped many make $5 to $10 a week extra in spare time while learning. I send special Radio equipment to conduct experiments and build circuits. This 50-50 training method makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. YOU ALSO GET A MODERN PROFESSIONAL ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE SET SERVICING INSTRUMENT to help you make money fixing Radios while learning and equip you for full time work after you graduate.

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Act Today! Mail the coupon for my 64-page book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my Course in Radio and Television; shows more than 100 letters from men I have trained; telling what they are doing and earning. Read my money back agreement. MAIL COUPON in an envelope or paste on a penny postcard—NOW!
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AFTER

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"I have received my teeth and am PROUD OF THEM."

Mrs. Geo. G. Conkite, Bridgeport, Connecticut, writes:

"I received my set of teeth. I wear them day and night. I have good reason to be well pleased with them. Thank you very much."

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The skilled accountant takes the figures handed him by the bookkeeper, and *analyzes* and *interprets* them.

He knows how much the costs in the various departments should amount to, how they may be lowered.

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He knows, in a given business, what per cent of one's working capital can safely be tied up in merchandise on hand, what per cent is safe and adequate for sales promotion. And these, by the way, are but two of *scores* of percentage-figures wherewith he points the way to successful operation.

He knows the intricacies of government taxation.

He knows how to *survey* the transactions of a business over a given period; how to show in cold, hard figures the progress it has made and where it is going. He knows how to *use* these findings as a basis for constructive policies.

In short, the trained accountant is the *controlling engineer* of business—one man business cannot do without.

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Small wonder that accountancy offers the trained man such fine opportunities—opportunities well illustrated by the success of thousands of LaSalle accountancy students.* For example—one man was a plumber, 32 years old, with only an eleventh grade education. Today he is auditor for a large bank and his income is 325 per cent larger.

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A woman bookkeeper—buried in details of a small job—is now auditor of an apartment hotel, and her salary mounted in proportion to her work.

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1. *Q. Does the death of one or more members of the insured family cancel the Policy?*
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2. *Q. How are premiums paid?*
   A. Pay your $1.00 premium monthly. You will receive a receipt and premium notice each month. NO collectors will ever call on or bother you.
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   A. No. But any members of your family who are not in good health cannot be insured.

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Read this typical letter from one of our students

YES, just like thousands of others, who thought music was hard, this man got the surprise of his life when he tried this easy way to learn music at home. And no wonder! Instead of months of tedious study and practice, he found himself actually playing real tunes in the very first few weeks!

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"I didn't even dream that I could actually learn to play without a teacher, because I had always heard that it couldn't be done. I couldn't afford a teacher so I didn't think it would do me any harm to take your course.

"When I received the lessons I took the instantaneous note finder and struck the notes right off. You can imagine my surprise when after three or four weeks I found that I could actually play real tunes.

"Now, when I play for people they will hardly believe that I learned to play so well with just a correspondence course in so short a time. I am getting to the point where even the hardest music holds no terrors for me."

(Signed) *H. C. S., *Calif.*

FREE PROOF it's fun to learn the U. S. School Way . . . and it costs less than 7c A DAY

Plays on Radio
I am happy to tell you that for four weeks I have been on the air over our local radio stations. So thanks to your institution for such a wonderful course.
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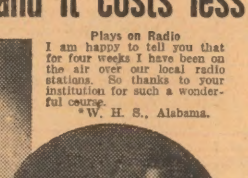
Wouldn't Take $1,000 for Course
The lessons are so simple that anyone can understand them. I have learned to play by note in a little more than a month. I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for my course.
*S. E. A., Kansas City, Mo.



Easy to Understand
The manner in which the various lessons are explained is very helpful as well as interesting. It makes one feel that the explanation is being given in person.
*W. W., Florida.

* *Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures posed by Professional models.*

Here's the best news of all! By this easy, modern method, you can now learn to play your favorite instrument, right at home, in your spare time, for less than SEVEN CENTS A DAY! And that covers *everything*, including valuable sheet music. No extras of any kind. What's more, it doesn't take years to learn this way. You learn to play in much LESS time than you probably ever dreamed possible.

It's easy as A-B-C. It's FUN! You learn to play by *playing*. If interested, send at once for the Free Print and Picture Sample that shows HOW and the handsome illustrated booklet that gives complete information. Just mail the coupon. (Instruments supplied when needed, cash or credit.) **U. S. SCHOOL of MUSIC, 2943 Brunswick Bldg., New York, N. Y.**

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Piano	Mandolin	Trombone	Piano Accordion
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Guitar	Clarinet	Ukulele	Hawaiian Guitar
Cello	Trumpet	Cornet	Other Instrument

Name .....

Street .....

City ..... State.....

☐ Check here if under 16 years of age.

BLEEDING GUMS PYORRHEA TRENCH MOUTH

Don't wait until it's too late and lose your teeth. PYRO which has astounded the medical profession. PYRO gets right at the trouble and kills the poisonous germs. One reason why PYRO works so efficaciously is because it actually penetrates the gums, thereby killing the germs inside and out. Remember pyorrhea and trench mouth. If unattended, permits the infection to spread quickly, and before you know it, teeth are rotted and bone construction is destroyed and teeth fall out.

PYRO SAVES YOUR TEETH or *NO COST!*

You can believe the sworn affidavits of doctors and dentists who have tried this new discovery on most stubborn cases of pyorrhea, trench mouth and bleeding gums.

PYRO was used with startling success many times, in cases that seemed hopeless . . . where everything else failed. PYRO is almost uncanny in getting quick and sure results. It gets to the root of the trouble because PYRO has a penetration of ¼ inch in 5 minutes and it corrects and heals as it penetrates the diseased areas. If your gums are sore or bleed when brushed. . . . If your teeth are loose or pus pockets have formed, order PYRO today for quick correction . . . act now before you lose your teeth entirely.

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Mrs. W. H. Kirby, 45 East 66th Street, New York, writes: "For a number of years I suffered with an advanced case of pyorrhea, constant treatments seemed only to arrest the disease. I was told I would lose my teeth. Then I heard of this new remedy. Being desperate, decided to try it. Am very happy now. My gums are healthy, teeth tight, and write this hoping that others suffering as I, will try it."

Don't Lose Your Teeth

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We have 45 pages of affidavits attesting to the wonderful powers of PYRO. So positive are we that it will bring you the health and happiness you have been seeking, that we will send it to you without a single penny of risk. Send $2 today for the full home treatment or we will send C.O.D. for $2 plus postage. Use PYRO as directed and if not 100% delighted with results, return the unused bottle and we will refund the purchase price in full.

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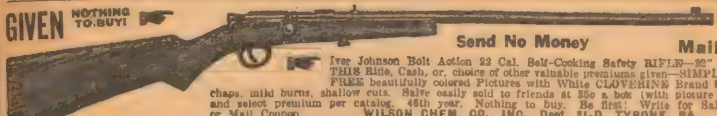

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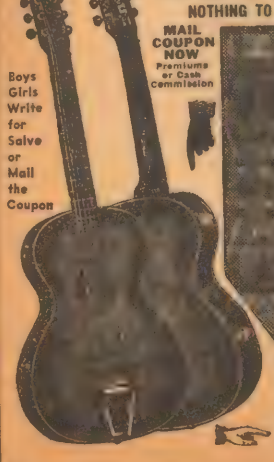

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Standard guitar, Indian blankets, other musical instruments, other blankets, other premiums or cash GIVEN—JUST give away free pictures with White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE for chaps and mild burns, easily sold to friends at 25c a box (with FREE picture) and remit per catalog. Nothing to buy. Write or mail coupon now!

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WRITE or PASTE COUPON ON A POSTAL or MAIL COUPON in an envelope NOW! Which premium do you like best?

A New Department for Readers Conducted by

FOG HORN CLANCY

America's Most Famous Rodeo Expert and Handicapper

HI, pals. It is time for another jaunt along Western trails and, of course, we will talk as we ride. The conversation no doubt will be about the time when these same trails, most of which are now paved highways, were just trails.

Trails of the West, Arizona trails, for this time we are taking the trail to Arizona, trails over which thousands of head of cattle passed, where honest cattlemen rode and where cattle rustlers, gunmen and outlaws also rode, trails over which pioneers trekked Westward!

Wagon train trails over which rode men of action going West, the men who tamed that vast expanse that was once the home of the wild buffalo and the hunting grounds of the Indians, men riding into new adventures, into the land of Indian battles, of range wars and stage holdups!

Have you ever ridden through Arizona? I mean ridden leisurely along where you had time to admire the scenery, away from the paved highways, following a dim trail that led you to, you knew not where, through canyons walled in by bluffs of red rock towering more than a thousand feet, with here and there upon their face growing a green mesquite or cacti? and have you wondered how it ever came to grow there on the face of the cliff? and have you momentarily expected to see its roots turn loose and cause it to topple into the bottom of the gorge?

Desert Enchantment

There is something enchanting about a ride through the desert; not one of those deserts that are just a vast area of shimmering sand, but an Arizona desert where you pick your way through a tangle of mesquite and ironwood, palo verde and saguaro and cholla and prickly pear, a desert where if you are lost, you are really lost, and if the sun happens to be high overhead you have no sense of direction.

True, there is more or less a sense of loneliness upon the desert, but one at that time seems to be so close to nature, and may for the first time realize how wonderful nature is that this realization in a way overshadows the feeling of loneliness. It must be that "close to nature" feeling that so grips the class of men known as desert rats, which causes them to spend the greater portion of their lives in the desert.

Arizona sunsets are beyond the description of any writer, and at night the stars seem close, almost intrusive in their brilliance. They make one feel as though one could stroke the blue-black velvet of the sky.

There is also plenty of what the Westerner calls elbow room, plenty of room for lung expansion and plenty of good clean air with which to expand one's lungs. When it is hot there is not the humidity noticed in the lowlands and the cold never seems to penetrate to the marrow of one's bones, as it does in some sections of our country.

Rich in folklore, early-day tradition and romance, Arizona's past is interesting, and many points where desperate gun battles, robberies, stage holdups, Indian battles and gun battles between rival outlaws, similar to our now Eastern gang wars, took place, may be pointed out to visitors.

Among these are the remains of a once stately cottonwood tree which once stood proudly upon the bank of the San Pedro river at Charleston, a large overhanging limb of which served as the gallows for the hanging of a score of outlaws in the early and turbulent days of Arizona territory.

After lawmen got the upper hand of outlaws, and executions were conducted under law and order, the stately cottonwood having seemingly served its purpose, was no longer used as a gallows. The San Pedro river waters began eating away the earth at its roots until it lay dead and decaying as were the bodies of the outlaws whose weight it had supported in their death struggles at the end of the hangman's rope.

Skeleton Canyons where William Graham, alias Curley Bill, and his gang waylaid, ambushed and killed a score or more Mexican smugglers who had crossed the border with a supposedly large amount of gold and silver, horses and cattle. Loot meant prac-

(Continued on page 15)

BILL, YOU SURE HAVE A SWELL BUILD! DID YOU TRAIN FOR A LONG TIME ?
ABSOLUTELY NOT! THE ATLAS DYNAMIC TENSION SYSTEM MAKES MUSCLES GROW FAST!

Here's the Kind of MEN I Build!

Charles Atlas

An actual, untouched photo of Charles Atlas, twice winner of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" — who offers you this 7-DAY TRIAL OFFER.

Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?

MEN—Meet J. G. O'Brien, of California, one of my Silver Cup Winners! Look at that strong neck—those broad, handsome, perfectly proportioned shoulders—that muscled chest and stomach. Read what he says: "Look at me NOW! 'Dynamic Tension' WORKS! I'm proud of the natural, easy way you have made me an 'Atlas Champion'!"—*J. G. O'Brien.*

I myself, was once a skinny weakling of 97 lbs. I didn't know what real health and strength were. I was afraid to fight, ashamed to be seen in a swimming suit.

Then I discovered the secret that changed me into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man," the title I won and have held *ever since.* My secret is "Dynamic Tension." It is a *natural* method. Its purpose is not only to give you the powerful, rippling muscles you'd like to see in your own mirror, but also—for those whose systems are sluggish from lack of proper exercise—to help them tone up their entire body, inside and out.

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Do you want a better build? Are you dissatisfied with your present physical development? All I ask is a 7-DAY TRIAL. Just one week! In even that short time you will notice your chest hardening and filling out with solid muscle—or the 7-Day Trial will cost you nothing. Surely this is proof enough that by continuing with my "Dynamic Tension" method I will make you a New Man—give you bodily power and drive, and put you in magnificent physical condition which wins you the envy and respect of everyone.

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Let me show you the results produced for other men! I'll send you FREE my famous book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." It shows actual photos. Write your name and address carefully on coupon. Mail to me personally today. I'll rush your free copy to you AT ONCE! Charles Atlas, Dept. 77C, 115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.

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I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make me a New Man—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your FREE book, "Everlasting Health and Strength" and full details about your 7-DAY trial offer.

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● Why put up with days . . . months . . . YEARS of discomfort, worry and fear? Learn now about this perfected invention for all forms of reducible rupture. Surely you keenly desire—you eagerly CRAVE to enjoy life's normal activities and pleasures once again. To work . . . to play . . . to live . . . to love . . . with the haunting Fear of Rupture banished from your thoughts! Literally *thousands* of rupture sufferers *have* entered this *Kingdom of Paradise Regained*. Why not you? Some wise man said, "Nothing is impossible in this world"—and it is true, for where others fail is where we have had our greatest success in many cases! Even doctors—thousands of them—have ordered for themselves and their patients. Unless your case is absolutely hopeless, *do not despair*. The coupon below brings our Free Rupture Book in plain envelope. Send the coupon now.

Patented AIR-CUSHION Support Gives Nature a Chance to CLOSE the OPENING

Think of it! Here's a surprising yet simple-acting invention that permits Nature to close the opening—that holds the rupture securely but gently, day and night, at work and at play! Thousands of grateful letters express heartfelt thanks for results beyond the expectation of the writers. What is this invention—How does it work? Will it help me? Get the complete, fascinating facts on the Brooks Automatic Air Cushion Appliance—send now for *free* Rupture Book.

Cheap—Sanitary—Comfortable

Rich or poor—ANYONE can afford to buy this remarkable, LOW-PRICED rupture invention! But look out for imitations and counterfeits. The Genuine Brooks Air-Cushion Truss is never sold in stores or by agents. YourBrooks is made up, after your order is received, to fit your particular case. You buy direct at the low "maker-to-user" price. The perfected Brooks is sanitary, lightweight, inconspicuous. Has no hard pads to gouge painfully into the flesh, no stiff, punishing springs, no metal girdle to rust or corrode. It brings heavenly comfort and security—while the Automatic Air Cushion continually works, in its own, unique way, *to help Nature get results!* Learn what this patented invention can mean to you—send coupon quick!

PROOF!

Read These Reports on Reducible Rupture Cases.

(In our files at Marshall, Michigan, we have over 33,000 grateful letters which have come to us entirely unsolicited and without any sort of payment.)

Likes Brooks Best

"I bought one of your Rupture Appliances in 1933, wore it day and night for one year and laid it aside last December. The rupture hasn't bothered me since. I used several others without success until I got a Brooks."—J. B. McCarter, Route 2, Box 104, Oregon City, Ore.

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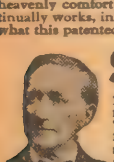
"My son has not worn the Appliance for over a year. He wore one for ten years and I am very grateful now to think he has laid it aside. He is twelve years old, runs and plays hard like all boys and is never bothered about the rupture."—Mrs. M. George, Route 1, Box 103, Cumberland, Md.



C. E. BROOKS, Inventor

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No . . . don't order a Brooks now—FIRST get the complete revealing explanation of this world-famous rupture invention. THEN decide whether you want the comfort—the freedom from fear and worry—the security—the same amazing results thousands of men, women and children have reported. They found our invention the answer to their prayers! Why can't you? And you risk nothing as the complete appliance is SENT ON TRIAL. Surely you owe it to yourself to investigate this no-risk trial. Send for the facts now—today—hurry! All correspondence strictly confidential.

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State whether for Man ☐ Woman ☐ or Child ☐

FREE! Latest Rupture Book Explains All!

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Just Clip and Send Coupon ➡

Brooks Appliance Co., 480-W State St., Marshall, Mich.

TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 12)

tically everything to men of Curley Bill's type while life meant nothing, especially if that life belonged to some one who had something they wanted.

The Oriental Gambling House at Bisbee had gathered most of the country's gunmen under its roof. Outlaws, after making a rich haul, might journey to the Oriental to further tempt Dame Fortune at cards or at the roulette wheel. Numerous gun battles took place there when hated rivals would chance to meet.

Lawmen, too, frequented the Oriental, for there were times when an outlaw, his tongue loosened by liquor, would let drop some word that would give a listening lawman a tip on who perpetrated some crime, or reveal the hiding place of some wanted criminal.

They Didn't Like Lawmen

When lawmen showed up in the wake of outlaws many times it was the signal for the start of a battle. Hunted men never liked the presence of officers, and usually their first thought was to shoot themselves out of any trap, and there was a time when there were so many outlaws in Arizona that crime practically ran rampant.

The O.K. Corral at Tombstone had its place in the gun history of Arizona, as it was there that one of the fastest, most furious gun battles between men fully versed in the use of firearms, took place.

It was at the O.K. Corral that Wyatt, Virgil and Morgan Earp and Doc Holliday fought it out with Ike and Billy Clanton, Frank and Tom McLowery and Billy Claibourne. Nine men in a gun slinging contest with life the stakes! Three of them were killed, the six others wounded, and yet the actual battle did not last more than a minute.

Wyatt Earp's Six-guns

There was perhaps no man connected with the early history of Arizona whose six-guns brought a bigger reputation than did those of Wyatt Earp.

At Dodge City, Kansas, with such able assistants as Bat Masterson, Doc Holliday and others of the same fearless type, Wyatt, acting as city marshal, had in a measure cleaned up the town and made it a place where a man had a chance to live and prosper if he was careful.

His first place of abode after arriving in Arizona was Prescott, but he had not been there long before the U. S. Marshal persuaded him to accept a commission as deputy U. S. Marshal with the territory he was to look after in and around Tombstone.

For about eight months after locating in Tombstone, Wyatt was the principal shotgun messenger for the Wells-Fargo Express Company, a vocation in which a man had little chance of growing old.

Shotgun messengers were picked for their fearlessness, their quickness and accuracy in shooting, their ability to size up a situation in lightning order and to determine whether or not it was a holdup, and then to go into

(Continued on page 110)

"I aint" "He don't"
"It's me!" "You was?"
"Can't hardly"

What Are YOUR Mistakes in English?

They may offend others as much as these offend you

IF someone you met for the first time made the mistakes in English shown above, what would you think of him? Would he inspire your respect? Would you be inclined to make a friend of him? Would you care to introduce him to others as a close friend of yours?

These errors are easy for you to see. Perhaps, however, you make other mistakes which offend other people as much as these would offend you. How do you know that you do not mispronounce certain words? Are you always sure that the things you say and write are grammatically correct? To you they may seem correct, but others may know they are wrong.

Unfortunately, people will not correct you when you make mistakes; all they do is to make a mental reservation about you. "He is ignorant and uncultured," they think. So you really have no way of telling when your English offends others.

FREE—Book on English

Sherwin Cody, perhaps the best known teacher of practical English, has perfected and patented a remarkable device which will quickly find and correct mistakes you unconsciously make. Correct English soon becomes a HABIT.

Mr. Cody's remarkable new invention, the 100% Self-Correcting Method, has already improved the English of more than 100,000 people. No useless rules, no tedious copying, no hard study. Only 15 minutes a day required. You learn by creating the HABIT of using correct English. Nothing like Mr. Cody's method has ever been used before!

A new book, "How You Can Master Good English in 15 Minutes a Day," is ready. It explains Mr. Cody's surprisingly easy method. Get a copy free and learn how to stop making embarrassing errors. You do not want others to judge you unfairly. Merely mail the coupon or a postal card, SHERWIN CODY SCHOOL OF ENGLISH, 33 Searle Building, Rochester, N. Y.

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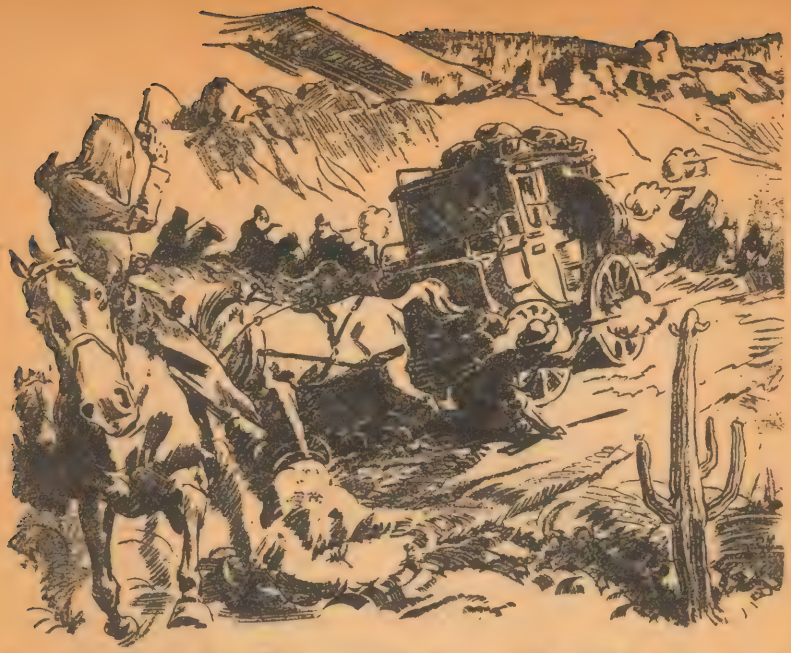
☐ *If 18 years or under, check here for Booklet A.*



DESERT OF DOOM

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

Author of "Black Stallion Mesa," "Warrior Range," etc.

When Wayne Morgan Meets Up With a Reign of Violence and Death, His Guns Roar in Lone Battle Against Human Vultures!

CHAPTER I

White Hoods

LIKE snails crawling over a vast expanse of white sugar the wagon train moved across the hot sands of the desert. There were five of the heavily loaded freighters, each of them pulled by a four-horse team. The drivers slumped down on the hard boards that formed the seats of the wagons—rough-looking, keen-eyed men who were conscious of the heat, of the far-reaching vista of white wastes, of the rolling dunes, and the shimmering dust veil that half obscured the low mesas in the far distance.

Scattered along the line of travel were six grim horsemen, six-guns in their holsters and carbines thrust into the saddle boots beneath their right legs. Constantly their eyes searched the arid wastes about them, striving to peer beyond the dunes that made

A Complete Book-Length Novel

The white-hooded men were attacking the stage Indian-fashion when the Masked Rider galloped forward with blazing guns (Chap. II)

it impossible for them to see for any great distance. Despite the merciless heat that cast a lassitude over men and beasts, these six were always alert —for they were the guards of the freight wagon train.

"No sign of trouble yet." It was stern-faced Ed Craven, the commander of the train who spoke as he swung his pinto in close to the driver of the first wagon in the string. His voice carried above the rumbling of the heavy wheels and the padding of many hoofs in the stretch of hard-packed sand. "Reckon we'll make it all right, Jed."

"Hope so, but we still got close onto ten miles more to go." The driver mopped his sweat-stained face with a grimy bandanna. "A lot of things could happen before we get to Gold Strike. Ain't forgettin' the last train didn't get through, are yuh, Craven?"

"No, I ain't forgettin' that," said Craven grimly. "Four wagons in that train, a crew of eight men—and the whole kit and caboodle just vanished in thin air." There was a frown on his stern face, and his dark eyes searched the bleak desert uneasily as though seeking some answer to the mystery. "Not a sign of them anywhere in the last ten days. Seems like the desert just swallowed them up."

BOTH men tensed as there came a shout from the mounted guard who had ridden to the top of a rise in the parched land that surrounded them. The guard whirled his horse in a frantic effort to escape from something. As he did so, the far-off report

of a rifle came like the crack of a breaking stick. The man in the saddle grabbed for the horn as a bullet caught him in the heart. His feet kicked free of the stirrups and he landed head first in the sand, to sprawl there motionless.

"Sufferin' wildcats, look!" shouted Craven.

Like a surging tide, a group of horsemen swept over and around a high dune. At least thirty or forty in number, their faces and shoulders were completely hidden by white hoods in which eye-holes had been cut, loose hoods that blended with the white shirts they wore which left their arms free.

"The Ghosts of Doom!" choked out the driver of the first wagon, halting his double team and reaching for the Winchester beside him. "Heard of them—but I didn't believe there was such an outfit until now!"

Closer came the band of hooded men and, as they drew within range, their rifles and six-guns started roaring. One of Craven's men went down, and then another let out a scream of mortal agony. The drivers of the train were also fighting desperately, but they were outnumbered to such an extent that it was hopeless from the start.

"Fight, men!" shouted Ed Craven, blazing away with a heavy Colt in his right hand. "Kill the murderin' dogs!"

A bullet shattered his right arm, another slug caught him in the left leg, a third plowed into his chest. He went down as his horse fell, and sprawled there in the sand, still cursing the men in the white hoods who were all about him.

"Ghosts—of—doom—" he groaned, then grew still.

The driver of the wagon last in line tried to turn his team and escape with the heavy-laden freighter. A hooded rider mounted on a big bay horse. He appeared to be the leader of the Ghosts

Band of White-Hooded Range Despoilers!

WAYNE MORGAN

of Doom. Taking careful aim, he shot the driver squarely between the eyes. The four-horse team made a complete circle before they stopped.

Within less than twenty-five minutes there was not one man alive of those who had been with the wagon train. Only two of the hooded killers had died. The Ghosts thrust their rifles back into their saddle boots and their guns back into their holsters and briskly went to work.

"Some of yuh climb up on them wagons!" shouted the leader. "Pick up them dead men and throw them in back of that second freighter. Rope them dead hosses. Get moving! Yuh all know what to do without me telling yuh!"

The hooded men worked swiftly and with grim efficiency. The bodies of all the dead men were placed out of sight in the designated wagon. The two dead horses were roped and dragged to one side by horsemen. From their saddles ten of the men procured spades and began burying the dead horses.

"Hurry up," ordered the leader. "We can't waste all day here."

Within half an hour all trace of the raid had vanished. Five of the hooded men tied their mounts to the back of the wagons and then took their place on the driver's seats.

"We head north as usual?" asked one of the men on the wagons.

"Of course!" said the leader of the band impatiently. "You know that. Get going, and stick to hard ground all yuh can."

The main body of the band swung into their saddles, and the Ghosts of Doom rode south across the desert behind the man on the bay horse. Soon they disappeared into the haze that hung over the rolling wasteland. Finally the lumbering wagon train vanished to the northward. Behind them on that bleak spot in the desert there was no sign that eleven men had died there attempting to defend the

freighters that had been bound for the little town of Gold Strike far to the westward.

The winds were already blowing desert sands into the tracks made by the heavy wagon wheels, obliterating them along with the hoofprints left by the horses. For the desert kept its secrets.

* * * * *

FIVE miles to the south seven waddies cursed the heat and dust as they drove a herd of cattle across a narrow neck of the desert, heading for the nearest shipping point which was the railroad town of Brushville twenty miles away.

The air was filled with the bawling of cattle, the shouts of the grim, dust-covered horsemen who rode with the herd, the clacking of horns and the constant rumble caused by the moving hoofs of two hundred longhorns over a stretch of hard ground.

A middle-aged, thin-faced man was riding point in front of the herd. This was "Slats" Liddell, the foreman of Joe Gale's Leaning G outfit. He glanced back as one of the men who had been riding swing on the left of the herd spurred his horse forward and then swung in beside Liddell.

"What's the matter, Happy?" asked the foreman. "Somethin' botherin' yuh?"

"I got a feeling," said "Happy" Lake who had received his nickname because he was constantly in a mournful mood. "We're heading into trouble, Slats. Yes sir, I got a feeling."

"Mebbe yuh're right." Liddell looked around him anxiously, his gaze sweeping over the bleak desert country all about the slowly moving herd. "There's danger in the air—"

To their left a horseman abruptly loomed into view, a strange white-hooded figure at the top of a hill. Deliberately he raised the rifle in his hands and took careful aim.

Liddell and Lake reached for their guns and had their weapons half-drawn as the Winchester cracked. Slats Liddell slid out of the saddle and hit the hard ground with a dull thud and lay motionless.

One after another of the Ghosts of Doom topped the rise until fifteen of them loomed into view. Every man had a rifle. As though they were going through a drill, they halted their horses and took careful aim. The six riders with the Leaning G foreman died without even getting a chance to fire a shot.

"All right, men!" shouted the leader of the Ghosts. "Masouter, yore unit takes over that herd and gets it headed north, pronto."

"What about these dead hombres?" demanded another of the hooded men. "We ain't got wagons to load them into this time."

"Just leave them where they fell," said the man on the bay horse. "We can't hide all traces on this hard ground. Gather up their hosses—we can use them. A couple of yuh better take care of the cavvy."

Again the hooded men went into efficient action. From the way they worked with the herd it was obvious that they had plenty of experience in handling cattle. They needed it, for the herd of longhorns was close to stampeding.

The ten men told off to take the job of driving the cattle got them headed northward into the desert proper and let them run. Soon they had disappeared, the two men in charge of the cavvy of Leaning G horses following close behind them.

"We're still heading south," announced the leader of the band to the remaining Ghosts. "The Overland is carrying a gold shipment, and we can use that."

They galloped away, a smaller band by half than they had been when they had attacked the wagon train, but were still a gang of ruthless killers. Behind them seven still figures sprawled motionless in the hot sunlight.

Time passed and then Slats Liddell moaned and opened his eyes. The first-fired bullet which had toppled him out of his saddle had creased his head and knocked him unconscious so that he had fallen off his horse, but he was not badly wounded.

He got weakly to his feet and then cursed as he saw the six dead men from his outfit lying all around him, as they had fallen.

He looked at the body of Happy Lake. In death the mournful cowhand seemed to wear a grim smile that he had never displayed in life.

"I'll get the hombres that did this, boys," vowed Slats Liddell. "I'll get the dirty coyotes!"

As he stood there Liddell saw that strange phenomenon of the wasteland —a mirage of the desert. In this misty vision the foreman saw a black-clad man mounted on a beautiful black horse, a horseman who wore a fluttering black cloak and whose face was hidden from view.

"The Masked Rider!" muttered Liddell in awe. "If only he weren't just a mirage!"

CHAPTER II

Overland Stage

WITH wheels rumbling and horses' hoofs clattering, the heavily loaded stage rolled down the mountain road and out onto the desert. Up on the driver's seat atop the coach old Ed Kimball handled the double reins of his four-horse team with the casualness of a man who had been driving the Overland for many years.

Kimball was thin and wiry, had thick gray hair and a long gray mustache. His clothes were so old and worn that he looked like an elderly scarecrow imbued with life. But the brown eyes beneath the battered Stetson were bright and keen as they peered through half-closed lids.

Beside him on the seat sat Sam Judson, the express guard. Sam was a big, raw-boned man who spoke only when necessary, and saw no reason for using two words when one would do. He held an old Sharps rifle across his knees and puffed on a foul-smelling pipe.

"Well, here we go across the desert," said Ed Kimball. "Shore is hot, Sam."

Judson did not even nod. What the old stage driver had said was too obvious for the guard even to bother to agree. It was hot. The breeze that came from the rolling dunes of the desert was like the breath of a fiery furnace.

Inside the coach the five passengers sat silently, gazing out through the open windows at the mountains that were gradually fading into the distance and the wasteland that was all about them.

Occasionally Reece Sutton glanced at his daughter who sat beside him on the rear seat of the coach. On the opposite side of the girl was Neil Ramsey, the lean, brown-haired young fellow who had just bought a spread near Sutton's Box S ranch. He had been shining up to Norma Sutton, but now even they had lapsed into silence.

Seated facing the three were two other men. The one on the left was big and heavy-set, with a strong hard face, and he wore the black frock coat, the white shirt and the string tie of the professional gambler. This was Warren Hickey, the owner of the biggest saloon in Gold Strike.

The fifth passenger was a tall, broad-shouldered, dark-haired man with a strong, ruggedly handsome face and keen blue eyes. He was dressed in a blue flannel shirt, faded levis and scuffed cowboy boots. He wore two guns in holsters that were tied low on his thighs; a gray Stetson was pushed back on his thick black hair, and he looked like a seasoned waddy.

There was an air of restraint and anxiety hanging over all four of his companion passengers on the stage that interested this man. They showed it in the way they constantly glanced out of the windows of the coach, their eyes searching the desert country all about them.

These people knew of the ruthless attacks made by the band of hooded riders. For nearly a month now the legion of killers called the Ghosts of Doom had made the desert a place of danger and terror. Yet these riders on the stage did not talk of the fears that were ever present in their minds. Their conversation was casual, for it was not their way to display their emotions, but the fifth man was aware of the tension.

"YUH say yuh're figgerin' on joinin' up with some of the outfits over west, Morgan?" asked Sutton finally, addressing this competent looking man who had been the lone passenger on the stage when it had stopped to take the rest of them on at Gold Strike.

"Considering it, Mr. Sutton," said Wayne Morgan in a low drawling voice. "Feller gets tired of drifting around after a time."

"But drifters don't stay in one place long." Neil Ramsey frowned as he glanced at Morgan. There was something about the dark-haired man that puzzled the young ranch owner. "That's why I'm not hiring any range tramps for my outfit."

"Don't reckon yuh're speakin' personal," said Morgan quietly. "So I won't resent that none."

"Never can tell about tumbleweeds." The gambler spoke up, never taking his hard dark eyes off the blond loveliness of the girl. "Sometimes they turn out to be right useful hombres when they get weary of trying to see what's on the other side of every hill."

"That's true." Reece Sutton nodded. The old cattleman was staring out of the window of the coach, his eyes fixed on the desert that was gray in the immediate vicinity and yet grew so purple in the distance. "Somebody coming. I can see them way off yonder."

At once the others in the coach grew tense. Morgan noticed the note of warning in Sutton's words—a hint of danger that hung over all of them. He stuck his head out of the window on his side of the Concord. His keen, hawklike gaze swept the wastes, and then his eyes narrowed. Far away little dust puffs rose above the white sage, many specks that were steadily growing larger—mingling together.

"Looks like a big bunch of hossmen," he commented over his shoulder to his companions in the coach. "They are headed this way all right."

"What of it?" demanded Ramsey impatiently. "Probably some cattle outfit heading home after a trail drive."

Up on the top of the coach the keen eyes of the old stage driver and the guard had also seen the approaching band. While the horsemen were still too far away to be recognized Ed Kimball decided there was something about them that he did not like.

"See them?" he asked Judson. "Coming this way, a-riding too fast for men what ain't aiming to make trouble."

"Right," said the express guard, assuring himself that the rifle across his knees was loaded and ready for action. He knew that it was, but he was a cautious man. "Hoods."

"The Ghosts of Doom!" exclaimed Kimball as he saw that the mounted men wore white hoods that completely hid their heads. "At least twenty of them. Looks like we're in for something, Sam."

Judson nodded, then glanced over his shoulder and frowned as Wayne Morgan swung lightly up on top of the coach. The newcomer grinned cheerily as he saw the guard glaring

at him, and yet there was a challenge in Morgan's blue eyes that stopped the angry question before it left Judson's lips.

"Figgered yuh might be able to use an extra man up here in case of trouble," said Morgan quietly, as he seated himself on the top of the coach and loosed the guns in his holsters.

"Might at that," agreed Ed Kimball, his eyes again fixed on the approaching riders after one quick glance over his shoulder to see who had climbed on top of the coach. "Getting closer. Mebbe we better make the first play, Sam."

"All right." Judson raised the Sharps to his shoulder and took careful aim. The rifle roared as his finger tightened on the trigger. One of the hooded men reeled back and then slipped limply out of the saddle.

"Got him!" exclaimed the guard.

The riderless horse lunged forward, galloping toward the stage with such speed that it outdistanced the mounts of the men behind it. Morgan watched the horse come closer and then got to his feet as he reached a sudden decision.

"I'll ride back to Gold Strike and get help!" he shouted.

Before Kimball and Judson quite realized what he intended to do, Morgan made a flying leap to the ground from the top of the stage. He landed on his feet just as the horse came dashing past him. Deftly he caught the animal by the bridle rein, ran along beside the horse for three strides, grabbed the saddle horn with the other hand and swung smoothly into the kak.

BLUE HAWK

He tightened his grasp on the reins with his left hand and his right flashed to his gun. He whirled the horse and sent hot lead roaring into the faces of the approaching Ghosts of Doom. Then before they realized his intention he swung around and sent the

horse dashing back in the direction of Gold Strike.

"After him, some of yuh!" shouted the leader of the Ghosts of Doom. "He's gone for help. Don't let that hombre get away!"

Five of the hooded men swerved to gallop after Morgan, and in doing so they made the fatal mistake of riding close to the stage. From the men in the coach there came a withering blast of gunfire, and two of the Ghosts died in their saddles. A third was badly wounded and unable to control his horse, which started running around in circles because the rider still clung tightly to the right rein.

Ed Kimball lashed his four-horse team into a swift gallop, and the stage went lumbering right into the remainder of the hooded men. From inside the coach Sutton, Hickey and Ramsey were firing from the windows. On top of the stage Sam Judson had exchanged his rifle for a six-gun which he was using grimly.

"Looks like our friend Morgan had a pressing engagement elsewhere," said Neil Ramsey, a note of scorn in his voice.

"He said he was going for help," said Hickey, but there was doubt in the gambler's voice as he spoke. "Maybe he is."

"Morgan didn't strike me as yeller," said Sutton as he aimed at one of the hooded men, fired, and grunted in delight. "Got him!"

Meanwhile Wayne Morgan was quite busy trying to escape the several Ghosts of Doom who were coming after him, their horses going at a gallop and their guns roaring. Morgan turned in his saddle and fired as one of the hooded men drew close, a lucky shot that caught the raider in the wrist and made him drop his gun with a howl of pain.

"More of these hombres I can get followin' me the better it will be for the folks on the stage," Morgan assured himself as he faced forward and urged his purloined horse to greater speed. "Hoped even more of them would follow when they saw I was heading back to town for help. Since that didn't work as well as I expected, I hope Blue Hawk has been following the stage as closely as I told him to."

He reached the edge of the desert and rode on back into the hard, rocky country of the mountains. Behind him came five hooded men. Then suddenly a rifle cracked out sharply. One of the Ghosts of Doom dropped as the bullet caught him in the heart. Morgan instantly swung around, his own guns blazing. The four remaining men went down as he poured lead into them. In a few moments there was not one of Morgan's pursuers left alive.

"Senor!" A vibrant voice called from the hillside, and a Yaqui Indian loomed into view. "There are more of these hooded men—I hope?"

"About fifteen more attacking the Overland Stage out on the desert, Hawk," said Morgan crisply as he rode off the trail. "They need help. The Masked Rider had better aid them all he can while you head for town and tell the sheriff what's happening. Where is Midnight?"

"Hidden here in the rocks, all saddled and ready, Senor," said Blue Hawk. "This is the place I picked for hideout. Other horses there, too."

MORGAN rode in the direction the Yaqui indicated and disappeared from view. A few moments later a black-clad man mounted on a magnificent black stallion came dashing out from the rocks. For Wayne Morgan, the quiet and dark-haired man who had been riding on the stage, was actually the famous Robin Hood outlaw known as the Masked Rider.

The Masked Rider! The black-clad man who had become a legend of the rangeland, and about whom stories of his prowess, his sympathy, and his aid to the oppressed were legion. A black

mask now hid the upper part of his face; the brim of a black sombrero shaded his keen blue eyes, replacing the Stetson he had been wearing while traveling on the stage. A black cloak fluttered about his shoulders.

Plodding sod busters spoke gratefully of the Masked Rider as they worked in fertile valleys. Cattlemen talked warmly of him, as did waddies in the bunkhouse. And always they spoke of a fighting fury who battled ever to aid the down-trodden, even though he himself was an outlaw and a wanderer of the owlhoot trails.

Though still young, Morgan's past was a closed book. Not even Blue Hawk, the Yaqui Indian who was his constant companion, knew his real name. That was a closely guarded secret of his buried life before he had become an outlaw who faithfully followed the best legends of the Robin Hood of another day.

There were times such as this morning when he assumed the role of Wayne Morgan, a wandering waddy. That part he could make convincing in any man's eyes, for not only was he an experienced cowhand but a bronco buster with few equals.

"I'm heading back to the stage, Hawk, now that I've found yuh," announced the Masked Rider, reining in his great horse, Midnight, in order to speak to the Indian. Head for town and get help—quick!"

"Si, Senor," said the Yaqui.

He was lean and wiry, this Indian, and dressed in a white shirt and white cotton drill trousers. In the bright-hued sash around his waist a sheath knife was thrust, but he wore no six-gun. A crimson bandeau held his long black hair back from his face, and it was obvious that Blue Hawk was a man who could take care of himself.

With a wave of his hand, the Masked Rider galloped away on Midnight, heading back across the desert to the aid of those hard-pressed people on the stage. He knew that despite

Les Dabney

his disguise he was just one man against a large number, but he depended upon the element of surprise and the ever-increasing magic of his name.

There were few outlaws who had not heard of the Masked Rider and in hearing they had had his deeds magnified to such an extent that they were inclined to look upon him as a superhuman being, a miracle man who was almost invulnerable to gunfire. In this they were mistaken, for the black-clad man bore many scars of bullet wounds on his strong body.

"Get moving, Midnight! We're heading for trouble."

The urgent note in his voice was all the beautiful, big black horse needed to increase his speed until he was fairly flying over the hot sands of the desert. Never did the Masked Rider find it necessary to force Midnight to greater effort by quirt or spurs. In fact, the black-clad man never used either one on any horse that he rode.

He rode steadily onward at this

rushing speed until the sound of distant gunfire came to his ears. The men on the stage were evidently still battling their foes. Obviously the raid on the coach was proving more difficult than the hooded band had anticipated.

"Ghosts of Doom," murmured the Masked Rider. "At least, that's what I heard the old stage driver call them as I was climbing up on top of the coach. Wonder who those hombres are? Pretty well organized, if they're known by name around this part of the country."

HE was close enough now to see men in white hoods circling the stage, firing as they went. Two of the stage horses were down, so the vehicle was no longer able to move. The Ghosts of Doom were attacking as the Indians had attacked the covered wagons of the first white men to this part of the country.

Closer swept the Masked Rider, and as he drew within six-gun range, he wound his reins around the saddle horn so that his hands were free to use the two heavy Colts in his holsters. Midnight was so well trained that it needed but a nudge of his rider's knee to guide him to right or left.

Neil Ramsey

The Masked Rider's guns seemed to leap into his hands and then they were blazing, as he rode down on the hooded men.

"Look out!" shouted one of the Ghosts of Doom. "Get that black jasper!"

The sight of the black-clad man coming to their aid gave renewed courage to the defenders of the stage. Ed Kimball had been wounded in the left arm. The express guard was a motionless figure sprawled out on the top of the coach.

Protected to a certain extent by the wood-work of the heavy stage, the three men and the girl inside had been grimly fighting off the raiders until the air was heavy with gunsmoke, and the constant din had nearly deafened them.

Norma Sutton crouched on the floor of the coach, her lovely face dirt-streaked, her beautiful blond hair hanging down over her slender shoulders. She was the daughter of a cattleman and she had learned to make every effort to help in time of danger such as this. She was busily reloading the extra six-guns that Warren Hickey and Neil Ramsey were wearing. This gave the two men an opportunity to fire continually and enabled Sutton to reload his own gun at will.

"Look!" exclaimed Ramsey, peering out his window at the black-clad man on the big stallion. "Who in time is that?"

"He's masked and yet he is fighting those killers in the white hoods," said Reece Sutton. "I've heard of him, but I didn't really believe there was such a man. He must be the Masked Rider!"

"The Masked Rider!" There was a strange note in Warren Hickey's deep voice as the hard-faced gambler stared at the Robin Hood outlaw. "What is he doing in this part of the country?"

"Proving a great help to us at the moment," said Ramsey dryly. "The

man is a fighting fool! Bullets don't seem to mean anything to him. Look—he has shot two more of the Ghosts of Doom out of their saddles. What a man!" The young rancher's voice rose excitedly. "He's driving them off—they're turning their hosses and running. We're saved!"

Those in the stage had taken their own toll of the hooded men, and there had been not more than ten of the Ghosts of Doom left when the Masked Rider had returned to aid those on the Overland. His fearless audacity and blazing guns had proven the last straw.

"Come on, men!" shouted the baffled leader of the raiders, wheeling his horse and galloping away. "Let's get out of here. The hombre that got away will be bringing more help any moment now."

EVEN to himself the leader of the Ghosts of Doom would not admit that it was the single-handed Masked Rider who was forcing this retreat of his men. That would be acknowledging that he was afraid of those blazing guns in the hands of the man in the black costume.

The Ghosts of Doom raced off after their leader, and the Masked Rider followed them for a distance, firing as he rode. Then, not foolish enough to be drawn into a possible trap, he reined in and rode back to the stage.

"Reckon you folks are safe now," he said in his heavily disguised voice as he halted Midnight close to the coach. "Then sidewinders seem to have gone some place else in a hurry."

Hickey stepped out of the coach, the other two men following. They stood in the hot sunlight and gazed at the black-clad man on the big horse. On the driver's seat old Ed Kimball was slowly shaking his head in wonder.

"Never seen nothing like it in forty years," he muttered. "Just one man, and he drove them away." He raised his voice. "Who are you, anyway?"

Norma Sutton

"Folks call me the Masked Rider," answered the man in the saddle. "If you was to unharness those two dead hosses, mebbe yore other team could pull the stage back to where yuh come from beyond the desert."

Ramsey, Hickey and Sutton hastily removed the harness from the two dead horses. The single team was soon hitched to the stage. Then they examined the bodies of the slain raiders, unmasking them as they did so. Each exposed face was that of a total stranger.

"We're s h o r e grateful, Masked Rider," said Reece Sutton. "And I'm thankin' yuh for all of us. Yuh got us out of a tight."

Atop the coach Ed Judson suddenly sat up and looked around him wildly. There was a jagged cut above one ear where a bullet had creased him and knocked him out.

"What happened?" he asked in a thick voice. "Who's that hombre in the mask?"

"That's the Masked Rider," explained Kimball quickly. "He came along and helped us drive them hooded jaspers away."

"At least, none of us were cowards enough to run away like that fellow

Morgan did," said Warren Hickey with scorn in his voice.

"I believe that he really went for help," said Norma Sutton from inside the coach. "Besides, there weren't enough saddle horses for everybody."

"Never mind him," said Reece Sutton, as Hickey flushed redly. "Let's get going, driver. Those hooded men might change their minds and come back."

"I'll stay here and sort of delay them if they do," promised the Masked Rider.

He sat motionless in the saddle, watching as the stage moved slowly back in the direction from which it had come. Finally it disappeared beyond the rolling dunes of the desert.

The Masked Rider glanced around at the bodies of the dead men that were scattered on the hot sands.

"Ghosts of Doom," he muttered grimly. "Reckon some of these hombres will do some real haunting from now on."

CHAPTER III

Desert Hideout

TWENTY minutes later found the Masked Rider still at the spot on the edge of the desert where the raiders had attacked the Overland stage. He gave a start of surprise as he saw a white-clad rider on a gray horse speeding swiftly toward him.

"Blue Hawk!" he exclaimed. "I told him to go and get help, but he is coming back alone."

"What happened, Hawk?" he demanded as the Indian rode up. "Thought yuh headed for Gold Strike to get help?"

"I did, senor," said the Yaqui. "Rode fast, but when I got to top of that high hill I looked back. Saw stage heading back to town and no hooded men around. Knew then that Overland didn't need help after Masked Rider got there, so I came back. You drove off the hooded men?"

"Drove them off after the folks on the stage had them pretty well worn down," said the black-clad horseman modestly. "Let's take a careful look at these jaspers in the white hoods. We might be able to figger out a little about them that way. Nobody on the stage knew them."

They ground-hitched their mounts and began a careful survey of the dead men scattered about on the hot sands of the desert. The dead Ghosts of Doom were all hard-faced men with the stamp of gunslick and killer about all of them.

"Look, Senor," said Blue Hawk, whose keen dark eyes had missed nothing. "See horseshoe branded on right arm?"

"Yuh're right." The Masked Rider swiftly examined three or four more of the dead raiders and found that every one of them had a small horseshoe burned in the flesh of their upper arm. "Looks like this is the brand of some sort of secret outfit. Them hossshoes are somethin' to remember, Hawk."

"Si, Senor." The Yaqui nodded. "What we do now?"

"Aim to trail those sidewinders that were driven away from the stage," said the Masked Rider. "They headed north, but that ain't no sign they'll keep going thataway."

"Then we follow and see where they did go," said Blue Hawk in a matter-of-fact tone. He went to his horse and unfastened an extra canteen which he handed to the Masked Rider. "Found stream back in the mountains and filled canteens. Desert gets very hot and dry."

"It shore does," said the Masked Rider as he fastened the canteen to Midnight's saddle with a latigo string before swinging into the kak. "Glad yuh brought along that water, Hawk. We may need it before the day's over."

As the redhead reached for his mask, the Masked Rider's right hand lashed out and grabbed the rifle (Chap. IV)

The Yaqui mounted, and the two men rode northward across the rolling dunes. Behind them they left the bodies of the raiders lying motionless on the hot sands. The black-clad horseman was sure that someone would be sent out to examine the corpses of the Ghosts of Doom when the stage again reached Gold Strike.

ON went the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk, walking their horses across the hard rock of the lava beds and onward into the purple haze looming ever ahead of them. At first it was easy to follow the tracks left by the mounts of the hooded men. Then, as they struck places where the wind had swept the sand off the rocky floor of a big basin, the trail vanished.

"Getting right hard to read sign, Hawk," said the Masked Rider finally. "Looks like we better separate and see if we can't pick up their trail easier that way."

"Good idea, Senor," said the Yaqui. "We both keep heading north?"

"Right."

The Masked Rider rode off to the left and Blue Hawk went to the right. The black-clad horseman reached a stretch of white sands and rolling dunes. Soon he found that the Yaqui had disappeared from view somewhere over to his right. For an hour he rode on steadily, finding no sign of hoofprints, and then he saw dust puffs in the distance.

"Someone heading this way, Midnight," said the Robin Hood outlaw, his keen blue eyes fixed on the moving specks. "It might be the Ghosts of Doom, but I kind of doubt it."

He rode toward the moving objects, and as he drew closer he saw that it was a small trail herd heading across a narrow section near the edge of the desert. There appeared to be five riders with the cattle. Midnight snorted as the black stallion saw the

other horses, and he trotted toward them.

"Ain't shore these hombres are gonna welcome me," said the Masked Rider thoughtfully. "If they have run across them sidewinders in the white hoods they ain't lookin' with much favor on a man that's masked like I am."

As he rode closer his hand was close to the butt of the gun on his right hip, for the waddies on this trail drive might be inclined to shoot first and ask questions afterward.

The two men who had been riding point ahead of the herd spurred their horses forward as they saw the black-clad horseman ahead of them. The Masked Rider saw that they were both big men, and that one of them was very fat.

"Hold it, gents!" he called as they drew closer, and he held his hand up in the old Indian peace signal. "I ain't looking for trouble."

"That goes double." It was the handsome, broad-shouldered man on a bay horse who spoke as he halted his mount not far from where the Masked Rider had stopped Midnight. The stout waddy also reined his mount. "I'm Les Dabney, owner of the Bar D outfit. Reckon there is only one man yuh could be, and that's the hombre they call the Masked Rider."

"Ain't no way of bein' certain of that, Boss," said the fat man in a voice that was deep and sounded like thick syrup being poured out of a jug. "Can't yuh never learn not to be too trusting?"

"Yuh're always complainin' about somethin', Hap Wilcox," said Dabney impatiently. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that the herd was still moving forward, passing some distance to one side of them. "Take them on through, boys!" shouted the owner of the Bar D. "Me and Hap will follow in a few minutes."

THE Masked Rider sat watching and listening, his right hand still close to the butt of his gun. He was puzzled by the friendly attitude of the big owner of the Bar D spread. Les Dabney again faced the black-clad horseman. He s m i l e d, revealing strong white teeth.

"You *are* the Masked Rider?" he demanded.

"That's right." The Robin Hood outlaw nodded. "Didn't think that anyone had even heard of me in this part of the country."

"Heard of yuh!" Dabney laughed. "There are m i g h t y few people throughout the West who don't know a little about the Masked Rider, and how yuh have helped those who were in trouble. I'm glad to see yuh here, for we shore need a man like you around this part of the country."

"Yuh mind if I ride on with the stock, Boss?" demanded "Hap" Wilcox plaintively. The fat man's face looked like a sorrowful full moon. "Seems like my headache is getting worse."

"Go ahead, Hap," said Dabney. "Mebbe the Masked Rider'll ride with us a little way so as I can tell him about the trouble that's going on around here."

Wilcox nodded and rode to join the man riding drag behind the herd that had passed and was now heading on across the desert. The bawling of the cattle and the clacking of horns sounded loud in the vast silence of the desert. The steers kicked up a shower of dust as they moved on over the white sands, following a big white-faced longhorn that was their leader.

"Wilcox is my foreman," said Dabney. "One of the best men in my outfit, but he is always suffering from some imaginary ailment. Today it's a headache." He looked at the black-clad horseman. "Are yuh willing to ride along with us a little way? Figger that yuh might be able to help us folks around here if I tell yuh what's been going on."

"All right," said the Masked Rider

amiably as he swung Midnight around and rode along beside Dabney. "What's on yore mind, Mr. Dabney?"

"A bunch of murderin' hellions—raiders who call themselves the Ghosts of Doom," said the ranch owner grimly. "It's awful! They've got the whole country around here terrorized. Rustlin' robbin' and killin'. Never know when or where they will strike. We have to cross this narrow strip of the desert in order to get our herds to the railroad at Brushville. We ain't never certain of getting through alive."

"What are you folks around here doing about it?" asked the Masked Rider.

"Everything we can. Sheriff Bob Field has been riding out hunting for those sidewinders with a posse day after day until he is worn plumb

ragged. If something ain't done soon to really get them skunks we'll have to send for the militia." The big rancher's expression was strained.

"Seems like if all you ranchers know about this bunch of raiders yuh'd join forces and clean them out," pointed out the Masked Rider.

"Of course we would—if we could find them!" exclaimed Les Dabney. "They have a hideout somewhere on the desert, and we never have been able to locate it. Seems like they just vanish into thin air."

"That don't seem possible," said the black-clad man.

"But it is! There have been whole herds disappear, and the men with them. Never found a trace of them. And just a couple of weeks ago a freight wagon train with a load of supplies for Gold Strike disappeared—wagons, hosses, men and all."

"They must be right smart," admitted the Masked Rider. He had been sizing up the Bar D outfit and had come to the conclusion that Dabney and his men looked as if they could take care of themselves when they encountered trouble. "Looks like yuh was figgering on meeting up with those coyotes. Notice that you and all yore men are wearing two guns."

"That's right." Les Dabney drew a big old-fashioned silver watch out of his pocket, and peered at the time as the watch flashed in the sunlight. "Three-thirty. We'll have to be moving faster if we expect to reach a water hole by sundown."

"How do yuh feel that I can be of any help to the folks around here?" asked the Masked Rider thoughtfully.

HE found the whole situation unusual. It was his custom upon discovering trouble in strange territory to investigate the situation in his own way, and then come to the aid of those he felt needed him the most. But here was a rancher asking his aid at first sight, apparently without the slightest doubt that he actually was the Masked Rider.

"By finding the hideout of the Ghosts of Doom," said Dabney. "That's how you can help us all. And if yuh do find it, there's a lot of us that's willing to follow yuh there and clean out those coyotes. That's what I mean!"

"Yuh're asking me to look for the hideout of these raiders?" The eyes that peered through the mask looked keenly at the big rancher. "Kind of showing a lot of faith in a man who yuh don't know anything about, ain't yuh, Dabney?"

"I don't think so," said Dabney. "I told yuh that I had heard of the Masked Rider."

They had been walking their horses as they talked, allowing the herd to drift on some distance ahead of them. The cattle and the Bar D riders were now about a hundred yards away.

"Look!" exclaimed the Masked Rider abruptly, pointing to the northeast with one hand. "Here comes trouble!"

Les Dabney cursed as he saw the band of horsemen who had loomed into view. There were ten of them and they were all wearing the white hoods of the Ghosts of Doom.

"The Ghost raiders!" exclaimed the owner of the Bar D. "Come on, they're after the herd!"

Midnight forged ahead of Dabney's bay as the two men urged their mounts into a gallop. From the men with the herd came the booming of their heavy Colts and the flash of gunfire. The hooded men, beaten off, whirled their horses and galloped back in the direction from which they had come.

"Come on!" shouted the Masked Rider as he galloped in pursuit. "Let's clean up this gang of sidewinders."

"Wait!" called out Dabney. "Don't follow them. It's a trick. There must be more of them hidden somewhere out on the desert. They'll get the herd while we are chasing this bunch."

"Then you stay here with yore outfit," shouted the Masked Rider. "I've got an idea."

The black stallion sped onward, and now the Masked Rider was galloping along so that the fleeting horsemen in the white hoods were on his left. He was carefully keeping out of six-gun range as he found himself riding in a direct line with the other men. Then Midnight gradually surged ahead.

"That's it, Midnight!" exclaimed the man in the saddle. "We'll keep them chasing us and mebbe they will sorta lead us to their hideout. Got a pretty good idea that the place must be somewhere to the north and that's the way we're heading now."

He galloped on, and the raiders gave chase like a pack of hounds after a rabbit. If any one of them found that he could down the Masked Rider it would be a feather in his cap.

OFF to the Masked Rider's left a rifle cracked—and one of the hooded men toppled out of the saddle. The black-clad horseman cursed.

"Blue Hawk," he muttered. "Fightin' for me by picking them hombres off with his rifle, but he's shore playing heck with my idea."

Again the rifle roared, and another of the Ghosts reeled back in the kak as a bullet caught him in the heart.

"Never mind the Masked Rider!" shouted one of the hooded men. "Let's get out of here."

They wheeled their horses and rode back in the direction from which they had come, speeded on their way by the rifle fire of the Yaqui. The Masked Rider reined Midnight, deciding it was useless to try following the Ghosts now that they were heading south. They would probably be kept quite busy when they again encountered the men of Les Dabney's trail drive outfit.

The black-clad man sat motionless in the saddle and somberly watched the retreating riders gallop across the desert until they vanished in the purple haze. He heard the padding of a horse's hoofs behind him and glanced over his shoulder.

Blue Hawk loomed into view, mounted on his gray, and there was a pleased expression on the copper-hued countenance of the Yaqui as he thrust his rifle back into the saddle sheath.

"Blue Hawk drive hooded men away quick this time, Senor," he said proudly as he reached the Masked Rider.

"Yuh shore did," said the Robin Hood outlaw. "Mebbe just a little too quick this time, Hawk. But come on, let's head north again. I'm still aimin' to try and find the hideout of the Ghosts of Doom."

CHAPTER IV

Amiable Drygulcher

LATE that afternoon the Masked Rider was still heading northward across the desert. Again he and Blue Hawk had separated, both continuing in the same direction, but so far apart that they were out of sight of each other.

Midnight plodded through deep sand that made the going difficult. His hoofs had clattered over stretches of hard ground as the man in the saddle had guided the big horse around areas of broken rock. The sand dunes were as numerous as the waves of an ocean. He had traveled across crested ridges and swelling mounds, all of which were different and yet seemed to form a strange pattern of blistering unity. Wisps of sand rose from their tops in ribbons, like steam from a cauldron.

Over everything hung the bright, blazing sunlight, the constant, seemingly eternal heat. The Masked Rider's throat was parched even though he occasionally sipped the tepid water in his canteen. He had paused to give the stallion a drink at a lone waterhole they had discovered some miles back.

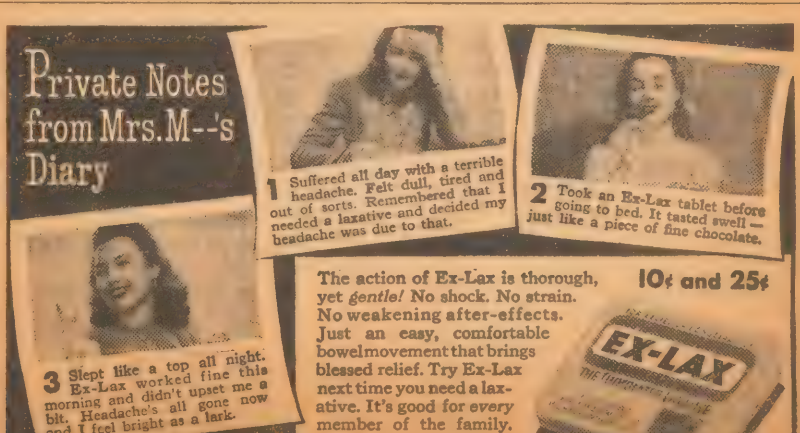
"There it is again, Midnight," muttered the Masked Rider as he peered through the shimmering heat haze into the purple distance. "That same mirage we've been seein' the past hour."

Ahead of him a vision seemed to loom in the air above the parched ground. It was a huge ancient castle nestling in the center of a green oasis. Massive towers appeared to thrust against the deep blue sky, and there was a drawbridge across the moat that surrounded the castle. Beyond the water of the small canal that surrounded the place there was lush grass and cool, inviting green trees. It was a crazy, incredible, medieval scene.

"No wonder folks lost on the desert go mad with thirst when they see mirages like that," said the Masked Rider as he took a sparing sip from his canteen. "Seein' a place like that, and knowin' it ain't really there."

He rode on for another half hour, and now his surroundings changed. Ahead there were signs of grass and fertile rangeland. To his left was the towering cliff of a mesa, its vari-colored walls a thing of spectacular beauty in the bright sunlight.

[*Turn page*]


Private Notes from Mrs. M--'s Diary
1 Suffered all day with a terrible headache. Felt dull, tired and out of sorts. Remembered that I needed a laxative and decided my headache was due to that.
2 Took an Ex-Lax tablet before going to bed. It tasted swell — just like a piece of fine chocolate.
3 Slept like a top all night. Ex-Lax worked fine this morning and didn't upset me a bit. Headache's all gone now and I feel bright as a lark.
The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet *gentle!* No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowel movement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax next time you need a laxative. It's good for *every* member of the family.
10¢ and 25¢
EX-LAX

A subtle warning of peril stole over this man whose destiny was to live the life of the wary—to know that danger ever followed him like some bright shining star. The keen eyes that peered through the mask were very much alert as they searched the surrounding country.

"I don't like this, Midnight," he said softly. "It's just too peaceful to be quite real."

At the base of the cliff a pile of giant boulders cast many deep shadows, despite the hot sunlight. There was something sinister about the blackness that shrouded the big rocks, and he examined them more intently. He abruptly flung himself out of the saddle as he caught a glint of light on blue steel.

Even as he fell a bullet whistled across the back of the black stallion. It would have caught him in the heart if he had moved an instant later. He hit the ground with a hard thud that jarred his guns out of the holsters and sent them clattering to one side. He rolled over and then remained still.

HE cursed softly under his breath as he saw that in making his fall convincing he had overdone it. His guns were just out of reach! He knew that if he moved he was quite likely to receive a bullet in a vital spot. On the other hand the drygulcher was certain to come closer to assure himself the man he thought he had shot out of the saddle was actually dead. If he did so it would be impossible for the Masked Rider to conceal the fact he was uninjured. That would mean a bullet in his heart just as inevitably. Yet his guns were just where he could not get them without moving.

For a long time he remained there waiting tensely, his keen ears alert to every sound. Midnight had moved off to one side and stood patiently waiting. Apparently the black stallion felt that his master had decided to take some strange and unexpected nap. The horse knew his master was still alive, for Midnight would instinctively recognize death, but the Masked Rider had never trained the intelligent animal to act in such a situation as this.

Finally a boot heel scraped on hard ground. The drygulcher was at last coming closer. The Masked Rider waited, the eyes that shone through the holes in the mask wide open and staring as he did his best to look like a dead man.

A big man loomed into view. One huge hairy hand clutched a rifle. He had a thick thatch of red hair, and his face was square and hard. The Masked Rider held his breath as green eyes glared savagely at him.

"The Masked Rider!" murmured the big man in a deep, rumbling voice. "And *I* downed him. Reckon I'll see what this hombre looks like without that mask."

He stepped forward and leaned over the motionless figure of his victim. As the redhead reached for his mask, the Masked Rider moved with the speed of a striking rattler. His right hand lashed out, caught the big man's rifle and gave it such a sudden jerk that it pulled the owner of the weapon off balance and sent him sprawling to one side.

In an instant the Masked Rider was on his feet. But the big man also scrambled upright. He had lost his grip on the Winchester as he fell, but before the Masked Rider could aim the rifle at him the redhead caught the black-clad man around the legs in a flying tackle. He brought him back to the ground with a thud that jarred them both from head to foot. The rifle flew to one side as they locked in physical combat.

"When Tom Malory kills a hombre he stays dead," growled the big man savagely.

The Masked Rider was too seasoned a rough and tumble fighter to waste any breath in words. He saw that Malory still had the advantage, though

it had not dawned on the redhead as yet. There was a six-gun in the holster on his right hip, and the Masked Rider was unarmed.

They struggled to their feet, pounding blows at each other. The Masked Rider landed a hard right on Malory's chin. The big man reeled back, but he was game, and he closed in with fists flashing. There was plenty of steam to his punches, and he apparently possessed a little knowledge of boxing.

Somewhere back in his hidden past the Masked Rider had received thorough instructions in ring tactics, and he now called on that art of boxing. He was weaving and rolling so that Malory found it impossible to get in the full force of his blows. Both men were taking considerable punishment, and it obviously was to be a fight to a finish.

"Right tough, ain't yuh?" muttered Tom Malory through bruised lips. "Well, I can take it, too."

THE Masked Rider decided that this big, fighting redhead possessed some admirable qualities despite the fact that he was a ruthless drygulcher. Malory fought fair, with no attempt to deliver any foul blows. Not once did he make any attempt to go for the six-shooter on his hip.

Malory lunged forward with an uppercut aimed at the Masked Rider's chin. The black-clad man rolled his head to one side and the blow slid harmlessly over his shoulder. Then the Masked Rider's right fist smacked solidly against Malory's chin and there was plenty of weight behind the blow.

The redhead brought up short, and the Masked Rider's left fist followed the course of his right. This proved too much for the redhead. Malory went down like a giant tree falling and sprawled there motionless, completely out.

"Reckon that settles that," panted

Leland Blunt

the Masked Rider grimly. He hurriedly picked up his guns and thrust them back into the empty holsters. "This Tom Malory is one fightin' fool at that."

The Masked Rider found himself puzzled by the big man. It was rather unusual for a drygulcher to display so much courage, be so willing to fight when the odds were not in his favor. It was hardly typical of the breed.

Removing Malory's gun from the holster and placing the rifle out of reach of the big man, the Masked Rider went to Midnight and got his rope from its place by the saddle horn. He swiftly tied Malory's wrists so that the redhead would find it practically impossible to get free.

"Don't like leaving this jasper here on the edge of the desert this way," muttered the Masked Rider. "And there's two reasons for that. First one is I ain't certain he's alone. He might be rescued in a hurry. On the other hand he might be plumb by himself—and a feller could die of thirst tied up thataway."

He swung into the saddle and rode off in search of Malory's horse. He found the redhead's mount, a steel-

gray gelding, ground-hitched back in the shadow of one of the big boulders. When he returned, leading the gray, the big man was sitting up, a rueful expression on his square face.

"Yuh got me, all right," said Malory, looking up at the masked man who had halted Midnight and sat in the saddle gazing at him. "How come yuh didn't put a bullet through my head and let it go at that?"

"That what yuh'd do?" asked the Masked Rider.

"If some sneakin' coyote tried to drygulch me, like I done you," said Malory bitterly, "I'd stake 'im out over a hot fire."

"Why did yuh do it?" asked the black-clad horseman conversationally.

"Ain't sayin'," said Malory sullenly.

The Masked Rider slid out of the saddle. He went to his prisoner and untied the rope that bound Malory's wrists. Coiling the lariat, he hung it back on his saddle. The redhead watched in silent amazement. He gasped when the Masked Rider handed him his gun, butt first, but he took the weapon and thrust it into his holster.

"Now we can talk man to man," said the Masked Rider. "Yore rifle is over there leaning against yonder rock."

"How come?" demanded Malory dazedly. "Ain't yuh sore at me for trying to down yuh the way I did?"

"Not any," said the Masked Rider. "I figger that yuh really didn't want to do it. So yuh musta been carrying out somebody's orders." He smiled. "Yuh wouldn't have been sorry about it if yuh was a real sneaking killer. So, who wants me killed, Malory?"

"That's true," said Malory. "If Dyke—"

"What about Dyke?" demanded the black-clad man as the other broke off. "Tell me, Malory. Remember I've given yuh back yore guns, and we're talkin' now man to man. Don't yuh think I deserve to know who wants me killed?"

FOR a moment Tom Malory hesitated. There was a puzzled frown on his face, and it was obvious that the big man could not decide what he should do.

"Who ordered you to drygulch me, Malory?" urged the Masked Rider. "Tell me!"

"It was the boss," said Malory slowly.

"Never thought that Dyke would do a thing like that," said the Masked Rider, deliberately pretending to know something about the redhead's boss.

"Me neither," agreed Malory surprisingly. "Dyke Tyler is one of the finest men I ever met, but he shore has been gettin' a lot of strange ideas lately."

"So I've heard," said the black-clad horseman, still leading the big man on, though he had never heard of Dyke Tyler. "What's he done now?"

"This orderin' me to drygulch people. Shore, he's half-drunk most of the time, but it just ain't natural. I owe Dyke a heap, and I'd do anything he asks of me, but I ain't never tried to kill anybody before 'ceptin' in a fair fight. And damned if I'll try drygulchin' anybody else for him!"

"Of course yuh won't," said the Masked Rider, his tone growing hard. "And since yuh've said this much, suppose yuh tell me just who this Dyke Tyler is. I ain't never heard of him before!"

"Huh? Yuh tricked me!" Malory glared at the black-clad man. "I thought yuh knew Dyke—knew about the way he has been actin'. Everybody around this part of the country does know him."

"Well, then, seein' as I can find out so easy by askin', yuh might as well tell me the rest, Malory."

"All right," the redheaded capitulated. "Dyke is an old prospector. He made himself the biggest strike there ever was about three years back."

"Oh, so he owns a gold mine then?" said the Masked Rider.

"Yeah—the Desert Nugget. Guess he must be a millionaire two or three times over. Sort of like that feller Death Valley Scotty. Dyke tries to be like him, too. Ain't he built himself a great big castle plumb smack on the desert—"

"A castle on the desert!" interrupted the Masked Rider. "Then it wasn't a mirage—it was real."

"Shore it's real," said Malory. "There's spots out on the desert where the castle can be seen good on a clear day. Lots of folks have thought it must be a mirage, but it ain't. It is Dyke Tyler's Crow's-nest Castle—that's what it is."

"Where is it?" demanded the Masked Rider. "In which direction, I mean."

"About five miles straight north from here," said Malory. "Yuh mind if I fork my saddle? I'm gettin' kind of tired standin' around."

"Go ahead," said the Masked Rider as he shifted in his own kak. "Mebbe yuh'd be willin' to show me the way to the castle?"

"Reckon there's no harm in that," agreed Malory as he got his rifle and swung into the saddle.

The Masked Rider calmly handed over the reins of the gray horse.

"Let's ride."

THEY rode northward, the Masked Rider a bit ironical at being on such friendly terms with a man who had so recently tried to kill him. Yet he liked Tom Malory. The big man was hard and tough, but beneath it all he possessed a certain rugged honesty, and there was no doubt of his loyalty to his boss.

"Where is this gold claim of Tyler's?" asked the black-clad horseman as the two men rode along.

"Beneath the castle," answered Malory. "Dyke had the big house built over the mine. He ships the gold out from there." The big man looked about anxiously. "Looks like I'm making a fool play," he went on. "If somebody spots me ridin' along with yuh free and easy-like when I had orders to shoot yuh they'll tell Dyke and he'll shore raise a rumpus."

"Wait a minute," said the Masked Rider. "Let me ask yuh about the Ghosts of Doom that—"

Before he could finish, Malory suddenly wheeled his horse off to the left and galloped away. The black-clad man sat motionless in the saddle as the redhead disappeared from view.

"Shore is strange," muttered the Masked Rider. "I'd like to know why this Tyler gave Malory orders to drygulch me. I don't believe that Dyke Tyler even knows I'm in this part of the country—if he ever heard of me at all."

A thought struck the Robin Hood outlaw. "Unless Tyler is in league with the Ghosts of Doom. Mebbe that's it! Them hooded jaspers are always heading north—and that's the direction in which Tyler's castle is located. Mebbe that's their hideout. I aim to find out about that pronto. Get action a lot quicker that way than trailing the Ghosts of Doom like me and Blue Hawk has been doing."

CHAPTER V

Desert Castle

UPON becoming certain that Tom Malory was really gone, the Masked Rider rode on across the desert, heading northward in search of Dyke Tyler's castle. Soon he left the stretch of rangeland behind him and was again traveling across the hot sands.

After he had ridden for some distance his keen blue eyes narrowed. There was something crawling over the sand ahead of him. It looked like

a giant spider creeping across one of the white dunes.

"That's a man, Midnight," said the Masked Rider. "And it shore looks like he is in a bad way. Let's go see."

He rode closer and saw it was a middle-aged man dressed in range clothes who was dragging himself across the hot sand. The Masked Rider swung out of the saddle, his canteen in his hand. As his shadow fell across the sand the crawling man collapsed and lay motionless, too weak to move farther.

At the same time a horseman loomed into view. The Masked Rider saw that it was Blue Hawk who now approached. Relaxing, he waved at his faithful lieutenant and then knelt to wet the parched lips of the exhausted man with water from the canteen.

"Water," croaked the middle-aged man. "Water."

The Masked Rider permitted him to drink a couple of swallows, and the water appeared to revive the waddy. He looked up and scowled when he saw the masked face that was peering down at him.

"Yuh're one of them," he muttered. "Come back to kill me like yuh done the rest of my outfit!"

"If yuh figger that I'm one of the Ghosts of Doom, yuh shore made a wrong guess," said the Masked Rider with a smile.

"Then who are yuh?" demanded the other.

"Folks call me the Masked Rider," said the black-clad horseman. "Who are you?"

"Slats Liddell," said the thin man. "Foreman of Joe Gale's Leaning G outfit. The Masked Rider—I remember now. Seen yuh riding a long time ago—thought yuh were a mirage."

"A mirage?" The Masked Rider was puzzled. "What do yuh mean? How long ago was that?"

"Must have been hours ago," said Liddell. "Them hooded jaspers attacked me and some of the boys as we was driving a herd across the desert to Brushville." The Leaning G foreman scowled. "Six men with me, and they killed every one of them without even giving them a chance. Picked them off with rifles just like they was rabbits."

"How was it that they didn't get you, too?" asked the Masked Rider.

"Musta thought they did," said Liddell. "A bullet creased me and knocked me out. Reckon it looked like I was dead when I fell out of the saddle. Anyway, when I come to my senses the Ghosts of Doom was gone with the herd, and the men of my outfit was all lying around me—dead."

BLUE HAWK rode up to the two men and halted his gray. It was often the custom of the Masked Rider and his Yaqui companion to pretend in the presence of others that they were strangers. Now Blue Hawk quickly assumed the role of a wandering Indian.

"How!" he grunted, holding up one arm in the Indian peace signal. "White man find trouble?"

"How!" said the Masked Rider gravely, controlling a smile with an effort, for the Yaqui was doing a beautiful bit of acting. "Who you?"

"Me Chief Red Fox," said Blue Hawk. "You Masked Rider?"

"That's right," said the Masked Rider. "How does Red Fox know?"

"Red Fox know everything," said Blue Hawk placidly. "Who this other man?"

"I'm Slats Liddell of the Leaning G," said the foreman with a scowl. "And I don't like Indians."

"My people find out white men not like them long time ago," said the Yaqui. "Maybe Indians feel same way about you."

"Here, here, you two," said the Masked Rider. "It don't matter whether yuh like each other or not." He looked disapprovingly at the waddy from the Leaning G though the

mask hid his wrinkled forehead. "This Indian appears friendly, Liddell. What's the idea of tryin' to stir up trouble?"

"Me good friendly," said Blue Hawk. "Not hurt pretty white man with funny face."

The Yaqui grunted as the Masked Rider gave him a quick look of warning. Blue Hawk's quiet sense of humor might cause real trouble if he was not careful.

"Asking Chief Red Fox a big favor," said the Masked Rider. "Want yuh to let this white man ride double with yuh. Want yuh to take him to some place of safety beyond the desert."

"Red Fox do it," said the Yaqui. "Know a place about five miles southwest where there is water and shade. No more desert."

"Reckon that would be somewhere near our spread," said Liddell as he got to his feet and stood swaying weakly. "Sorry I sounded so proddy, Chief Red Fox. I take back what I said about Indians."

"Good," said Blue Hawk. "We go now."

The Masked Rider helped Liddell up on the back of the gray behind the Yaqui. From what Blue Hawk had said the black-clad horseman knew the Indian planned to take the foreman to a place near the spot the Robin Hood outlaw and his companion had selected for a hideout. Blue Hawk was smart enough to realize that the Masked Rider planned to continue onward in search of the hideout of the hooded men.

The two men rode slowly off, riding double. The Masked Rider watched until they had disappeared beyond one of the rolling dunes. Then he again headed north in search of Dyke Tyler's castle. He still suspected that such a place might be the lair of the Ghosts of Doom.

It was close to sunset when he finally saw the castle looming ahead of him. It was a huge place built of stone and

The boy held firmly in his arms, the Masked Rider dropped from the castle window into the moat (Chap. XVI)

looking just as it had when he had seen it from the spot far out in the desert and had thought it was a mirage. The Masked Rider had received a good education in his boyhood, and he could speak perfect English without any grammatical lapses when he so desired.

Usually he spoke the lingo of the rangeland, for in so doing he was accepted as one of their own kind by those he encountered in his travels, and they never suspected that he had more than his share of book learning.

"A beautiful place, Midnight," he said softly. "Like the castles I read about in some of the books by Sir Walter Scott."

HE drew rein and sat gazing at the vista spread out before him. Turrets reached toward the blue sky, and he saw that the drawbridge across the moat at the entrance of the castle had been lowered invitingly. He could see a pair of huge gates beyond this standing wide open. Through these he caught a glimpse of a quaint courtyard. Yet, there was a somber, brooding air about the big place as it sprawled in the hot sunlight.

There was no one in sight, and the Masked Rider found it easy to visualize armor-clad knights riding up to this stronghold. Here King Arthur might have dwelt and ruled the men who formed the Round Table. Here steel might have clattered against the shields of valiant warriors as they gave battle to their foes.

Stately trees grew all around the outside of the moat, their branches casting deep shadows on the water below them. The lowered drawbridge seemed a silent challenge to the black-clad man. The castle loomed vast and stately in the late afternoon sunlight, but there was an air of mystery about the place that was intensified by the silence that hung over everything.

The only sound that came to the Masked Rider's keen ears was the lapping of the water against the sides of the moat. Yet as he sat there a feeling of imminent danger hovered over him. If the castle actually was the hideout of the Ghosts of Doom there should be guards stationed here at all times.

"I don't like this, Midnight," said the Masked Rider. "We make too good a target out here like we are now."

He glanced to the west. It would not be long until the sun disappeared behind the mountains, and night would come quickly in this desert country. He decided to wait until it grew dark before trying to explore the castle.

He turned Midnight and rode away, vanishing from the sight of anyone within the castle who might have been watching him. Then he circled around, riding thoughtfully through the acres of grass and brush and trees that surrounded this queer place Dyke Tyler had built on the desert.

Beneath the shelter of a big oak tree the Masked Rider finally dismounted, and waited patiently for the coming of night. He saw many things as he studied his surroundings—the way the castle had been built on a stretch of fertile land right at the edge of the desert, that there was a stream which supplied the water that had been piped into the moat, that a number of the trees had apparently been transplanted.

As he looked about him, still conscious of the mysterious silence that hung over everything, his keen brain was busy. If this were the hideout of the Ghosts of Doom, why didn't the ranchers in this part of the country even suspect it?

"That's something I would shore like to know," said the Masked Rider softly to himself. "Malory said that everybody around here knows Dyke Tyler, so they must know about the castle, too. It ain't exactly the sort of place that could be hidden."

The more he thought about it the

more puzzled he became. Here was a band of hooded men who were terrorizing all of the people in this desert country. Cattle herds and freight wagon trains apparently vanishing in thin air. He wanted to know what had become of all the supplies that had been in those wagons. What had become of the cattle? And why?

THE most important thing in his estimation was what the Ghosts of Doom hoped eventually to gain by all of their raiding and killing. If they continued they would simply have the ranchers in such a state of terror that they would not leave their spreads. That would mean the coming of U. S. troops, or at best force the hooded men to raid afield. So far they appeared to have confined their activities to the desert.

There was something strange about the whole set-up, but he did not know enough about the matter as yet to make any decision regarding the motives of the hooded men. He felt that would come later when he had learned more about the Ghosts of Doom.

The sun disappeared behind the mountains and it grew dark swiftly. Shadows lengthened and grew dense all about the huge castle. Still the Masked Rider heard no sound or saw any sign that indicated there was a living soul in the castle.

Finally he ground-hitched Midnight in the shelter of the big tree, and ran swiftly through the shadows until he reached the drawbridge. Here he paused and stood listening. There was still no sound from the big courtyard beyond the gates. He crossed the drawbridge, passed through the gates and entered the courtyard.

His hands were close to his guns as he paused and gazed about him. The feeling of danger still lingered. To his left he saw the yawning mouth of a big doorway—a doorway high and wide enough for four mounted men to ride through it side by side.

"Mebbe that's the way they go," he muttered softly. "I'll take a look and see what I can find out."

He went to the big doorway. Beyond it was a long ramp that led down into a vast cellar beneath the castle. There was a dim light burning at the lower end of the ramp. He wondered if it had been burning all day or if someone had lighted it since nightfall.

Like a black-clad ghost he slipped down the ramp as silently as Blue Hawk would have done, for the Masked Rider had trained himself to move with the least possible noise when he deemed it necessary.

He reached the bottom of the ramp and found that he was in the upper workings of a gold mine. To his right was the mine shaft. There were dump cars standing motionless on narrow tracks.

"So this is Dyke Tyler's claim," he said as he peered about him. "Plumb under the castle. Tom Malory was right about that, all right."

He whirled as he heard someone pounding on the inside of a closed door that had been built in the wall of a passageway. He went closer to the door and stood there listening as he drew his right-hand gun.

"Help, whoever yuh are! Let me out!" shouted a muffled voice from the other side of the door. "Open the door!"

The Masked Rider drew back a bolt on the outside and flung the door open. He found himself facing a small man with gray hair and a thick gray beard.

"Who are you?" demanded the Masked Rider, his gun on the prisoner he had just released.

"I'm Dyke Tyler," said the bearded man angrily. "Who in time are you?"

"Folks call me the Masked Rider."

"Oh, they do?" grunted Dyke Tyler. Then, with a sly grin: "And what do yuh call yoreself?"

"Well yuh might say I'm sort of a Robin Hood outlaw," said the Masked Rider. "Yuh've read about Robin Hood, ain't yuh?"

"Nope," said the old man promptly. "I ain't never read about nothin'." He stepped out of the small store-room. "Wait here. I'll be back in a moment. Something I want to show yuh. You wait!"

BEFORE the Masked Rider could protest or try to stop him Dyke Tyler dashed back along one of the dark and shadowy passageways that opened on all sides of the upper working of the gold mine. The Masked Rider heard the pounding of Tyler's booted feet, and then a grunt and a heavy thud. He stood listening tensely, his gun ready in his right hand. A moment later the gray-bearded man reappeared, holding a rifle in his hands.

"Get out!" roared the old man as he came closer. "I won't have yuh spying on me. Get out before I put a bullet in yuh!"

"Wait a minute!" The Masked Rider's eyes flashed angrily. "I just let yuh out of that room where yuh were locked in, and now yuh turn on me. What the devil's wrong with yuh, Tyler?"

For an instant the old prospector stood glaring at the black-clad man, the rifle held ready in his hands. Finally Dyke Tyler smiled.

"Follow me," he said, heading toward the ramp. "Come on, before they get away. Hurry!"

The Masked Rider followed him up the ramp and into the courtyard. His gun covered the old man, for he did not know what Tyler might try to do next. The prospector led him across the court and through the gates at the entrance to the castle.

"Come on," said Dyke Tyler, motioning for the black-clad man to follow him across the bridge. "Hurry!"

They reached the far end of the bridge, and just as they did so the Masked Rider heard the pounding of approaching hoofs. A rider was coming. The moon broke through the clouds, and a horseman loomed into view, riding across the lush grass at the south side of the castle.

"Here he comes again," muttered Tyler in annoyance, looking at the horseman. "Always bothering me about something."

"Who is it?" asked the Masked Rider.

The rider was still too far away for him to perceive in the moonlight, but the palomino the horseman forked was a distinctive animal.

"It's Neil Ramsey," said Dyke Tyler.

"Oh, Ramsey," said the Masked Rider as the rider drew close and he recognized the good-looking young man. The Robin Hood outlaw dropped his right hand gun back into the holster. "What did yuh want to show me, Dyke?"

"Never mind," said the old prospector, looking at the young rancher. "What do you want, Ramsey?"

"Got a paper for yuh to sign, Dyke," said Ramsey, glancing at the Masked Rider, and then apparently ignoring his presence. "Brought the deed for them south forty acres."

"Why didn't yuh just sign it for me instead of coming all the way here, Ramsey," said Tyler impatiently. "Shucks—you can make an 'x' as good as I can."

"Come on back in the castle where there's some light," said the young rancher. He glanced at the Masked Rider. "Yuh shore get around, mister. Last time I seen yuh was when yuh come to the aid of all of us on the stage."

"Reckon yuh all got back to Gold Strike safely," opined the Masked Rider.

"We did," said Ramsey. "And thanks. Come on, Dyke we got business."

"What did yuh want to show me?" asked the Masked Rider, looking at the old prospector.

"The way out of my castle," said Tyler with a laugh. "Good-by now!"

He ran back across the drawbridge, and Neil Ramsey rode after him. The Masked Rider stood there watching them depart, and there was a puzzled frown on the strong face that was hidden by the mask. Finally he shrugged and headed for his horse. As he swung into the saddle and rode away he was still thinking deeply.

CHAPTER VI

The Sheriff's Posse

AFTER leaving the Masked Rider, the Yaqui and Slats Liddell rode on across the desert. Since the gray was carrying double, Blue Hawk held the horse down to a walk. The foreman of the Leaning G outfit was still very weak and he was forced to cling to the Yaqui to keep from falling off.

"What happened to you?" asked Blue Hawk curiously. "You get lost on desert?"

Blue Hawk having arrived after Liddell had told his story to the Masked Rider, he did not know exactly what had happened to the thin waddy. Of course, the Yaqui had been able to read sign, and he had seen the bodies of the men who had been with Liddell, for he had run across the dead men farther back on the desert. However, he did not know whether the foreman had been with those other men or not.

"It was the Ghosts of Doom," answered Liddell. "I'll tell yuh about it, Chief Red Fox."

He told the story of the attack on the trail herd while the gray plodded on across the desert and Blue Hawk listened intently. The Yaqui remained silent until Liddell had finished.

"Ghosts very bad men," said Blue Hawk. "Nobody know who they are?"

"Don't seem so." Slats Liddell gratefully took a drink from the water canteen Blue Hawk handed him. "Thanks—that shore tastes good. But about them hooded jaspers. There has been so many trail outfits disappearing that my boss, Joe Gale, and the rest of the ranchers around here are plumb worried."

"Worry won't drive ghosts away," observed Blue Hawk sagely. "White men should do something."

"We all know that," admitted Liddell. "Sheriff Bob Field has been tryin' to find the hideout of the Ghosts for the last couple of weeks. But he is hampered. There's some folks around here what don't like the sheriff. They figger that Bob is too young for the job. Reckon he ain't even as

[*Turn page*]

much as thirty years old yet, yuh see."

"Sometimes young horse runs fastest," stated the Yaqui. "You think this sheriff good man?"

"Reckon Field is all right," said the foreman thoughtfully. "Mebbe he's a little hard-headed, but me and him get along all right."

As they rode on, traveling the five miles between the spot where Liddell had been found on the desert and the place back in the mountains that Blue Hawk had selected for a hideout, the foreman talked on. In talking he gave the Indian much information about the people and the country around them. It was information that Blue Hawk would pass along to the Masked Rider as soon as the two men again met.

Finally they left the desert behind them and started riding through the foot-hills. Here the hot sands gave way to rolling hills and there were patches of grass and mesquite. When they reached a small creek the Yaqui halted the gray. Dusk was creeping down out of the hills.

"We stop here and give horse chance to drink," announced Blue Hawk.

HE slid out of the saddle and helped Liddell down. The foreman was growing stronger, able to take care of himself far better than he had been out on the desert.

"Funny," said Liddell slowly as he glanced around him at the peaceful scene. "Thanks to you and the Masked Rider, I'm safe now, but I got a feeling like a pard of mine, Happy Lake, used to have at times."

"What kind of feeling was that?" asked Blue Hawk, removing the bridle from the gray to let the horse drink.

"Sort of like somebody was walkin' over my grave," said Liddell.

The Yaqui was enough of a savage instinctively to sense danger. He merely nodded as he drew his Winchester out of the saddle boot. His keen dark eyes were searching the rolling country about him as he stood with the gun in his strong copper-hued hands.

Satisfied there was nothing sinister to be seen in that direction, he turned his back on the foreman and peered at a cluster of rocks to the east. Behind him he suddenly heard the whip-like crack of a rifle.

Blue Hawk whirled just in time to see Slats Liddell pitch forward, to lie on his face in the grass. The Yaqui snapped the rifle to his shoulder and fired at the telltale puff of smoke rising from a rock some twenty yards to the south.

Again the drygulcher's rifle roared. Blue Hawk dropped flat as a bullet whistled over his head. He fell so that he was in a position to still use his Winchester. He aimed at the rock and fired a second time.

A moment later he heard a crashing in the brush and realized the drygulcher was getting away. He leaped to his feet, and ran toward the gray. The bridleless horse had raised his head at the sound of the shot, and now he pranced away as the Yaqui ran toward him.

Blue Hawk swung around, and then grunted angrily as he saw that the killer had mounted and was beating a hasty retreat from the scene. The Yaqui realized that by the time he caught the gray and got the bridle back on, the drygulcher would be out of sight. He aimed and fired once more, even though the range was long. The man in the saddle jerked to one side as though the bullet had come dangerously close, but he kept on going and in a few moments had disappeared behind a clump of trees.

Blue Hawk finally managed to catch the gray and replace the bridle. He swung into the saddle and rode swiftly after the drygulcher. For a distance the killer's trail was plain, and then it vanished in a stretch of rocky ground. It was too dark to trail him.

The Yaqui realized that any further

attempt at pursuit was useless, and he glumly rode back to the spot where he had left Slats Liddell.

"Bad!" said the Yaqui. "Blue Hawk let drygulcher get away."

The Yaqui was disgusted with himself as he returned to the still form of Slats Liddell. He examined the foreman and found that he was dead, the rifle bullet having entered through his back, piercing his heart, and exiting from his chest, leaving a hole big enough to thrust in a fist.

Blue Hawk turned the dead man back over. He stood up with a scowl on his face, the rifle in his right hand. His keen ear had caught the pounding of horses' hoofs. A group of riders were coming, and they were moving fast.

THE Yaqui went to the gray and hastily replaced the horse's bridle. He swung into the saddle to ride away when a band of horsemen loomed into view. There were twenty of them, and the man in the lead wore a sheriff's star on his gray flannel shirt.

"If I run now they think I killed Liddell," said the Yaqui. "Better stay here and tell them what happened."

Sheriff Bob Field and his posse rode closer. At a curt command from the young sandy-haired lawman the riders spread out. When they halted their mounts they had completely surrounded the Yaqui.

"It's my foreman, Slats Liddell," snapped a broad-shouldered, white-haired man. "Looks like this Indian killed him."

"Me not kill," said Blue Hawk stolidly.

"Mebbe he didn't do it, Joe," said Warren Hickey, who was riding with the posse. The gambler looked thoughtfully at the Yaqui, and then glanced at Field. "What do you think, Sheriff?"

"I don't know yet," said Sheriff Bob Field. He swung out of the saddle, a lean, tawny sort of a man. "But I'm afraid it looks bad for the Indian."

"Yuh all can see that Slats ain't even drawn his gun," protested Joe Gale. "The Indian must have drygulched him and was fixin' to rob the corpse when we come along."

"Liddell was shot in the back all right," said the sheriff. "And by a rifle, looks like." He glanced at Blue Hawk, who sat motionless in his saddle, his Winchester still in his hands. "That Indian has a rifle."

"What's yore name?" asked Hickey, his hard eyes fixed on the expressionless face of the Yaqui.

"Chief Red Fox," answered Blue Hawk. "Find white man out on desert dying of thirst. We ride double and come here. Stop to water my horse. Then drygulcher kill Slats Liddell."

None of the men that formed the posse saw the black-clad horseman who had come close under cover of darkness and now paused in the shadow of the overhanging branches of some trees.

The Masked Rider had heard the sound of distant gunfire when he was still some distance away. He had been heading back for the hideout after having left Dyke Tyler's castle. Now he slid out of the saddle, ground-hitched Midnight and crept closer to the posse who surrounded the Yaqui. He listened tensely as old Joe Gale spoke.

"The Indian is lyin'," growled the hot-headed old rancher. "He killed Liddell and was aimin' to rob him just like we said first off. Come on boys, let's lynch this sneakin' drygulcher."

"Wait a minute, Joe," said Hickey. "Didn't yuh tell us that Liddell was bossin' that trail herd yuh sent out this mornin'?"

"Shore he was," said the owner of the Leaning G. "Didn't we find them other six men that had been with my trail herd all dead out there on the desert? Slats musta got away and was ridin' for help when this Indian

downed him to rob him."

"Hickey has proved there's a reasonable doubt of Chief Red Fox bein' guilty," said Sheriff Field. "Such being the case, I'm just arrestin' the Indian and takin' him to jail in town until we get the straight of this whole thing."

The Masked Rider frowned as he listened. He realized that he should come to the rescue of Blue Hawk, but if he did so now he would be forced to acknowledge that the Yaqui was his friend. They had found long since that they were able to work better against their hidden foes in strange country such as this if they pretended not to know each other.

OFTEN badmen ignored the presence of the Indian, considering him no more than some stolid redskin who was not in the least interested in their affairs. In so doing they had talked freely, not realizing that the gist of their conversation would be remembered by Blue Hawk and repeated to the Masked Rider.

If Blue Hawk's life had been in danger the black-clad horseman would have come to the Yaqui's rescue with guns roaring, but this was different. These men were law-abiding citizens, and the sheriff had expressed doubt as to Blue Hawk's guilt, saying he was merely going to lock him up until the matter of Liddell's death had been investigated.

"I still say lynch the Indian and get it over with," snapped Joe Gale. "But I ain't aimin' to tangle with the law about it." An idea struck the old rancher. "There's twenty of us here. How about our taking a vote on it, Sheriff?"

"Yuh're as stubborn as a mule, Joe Gale," said Warren Hickey. "I'm voting that the Indian goes to jail."

"Chief Red Fox vote same thing," said Blue Hawk quickly.

Someone laughed, and the tension that hung over the men of the posse appeared to relax the shadowy mounted figures in the blue of the night. Sheriff Field swung back into the saddle and jockeyed his horse around so that he was in a position to watch the rest of the men.

"Reckon if yuh demand to vote on it then I've got to let yuh do it," he said quietly.

As he listened, the Masked Rider realized that the young lawman was clever. By hearing the vote of the posse he would know which of these men he could depend upon to aid him if Joe Gale did succeed in stirring up the hot-heads until they were in a mood to hang the Yaqui.

"I've voted against any wild lynching ideas," said the big gambler. "How about you other hombres?"

"I'm siding with the sheriff," said another member of the posse.

"Warren Hickey and Pete Osborne vote no," said Sheriff Field. "How about you, Alex Page?"

"Yuh know me, Bob," said Alex Page. "I'm a man of peace at all times. I couldn't face that kid of mine if he knew that I'd been takin' part in a hangin'."

"Three to one so far, Gale," announced the sheriff. "The rest of you jaspers speak up. And rattle yore hocks—we ain't got all night to hang around here."

From somewhere close by came the cry of a mountain lion. Blue Hawk breathed a sigh of relief as he heard it, for the Yaqui knew that call meant the Masked Rider was somewhere near. It was a signal the two men frequently used.

No sooner had the black-clad horsemen uttered the call of the mountain lion than he glided silently away. He was confident that despite the voting there would be no attempt to lynch the Yaqui. He had decided to head for the hideout as swiftly as possible, get one of the other horses and join the posse in the character of Wayne Morgan.

"That way I'll be able to sort of keep watch on Blue Hawk and be shore he's safe," figured the Masked Rider as he reached Midnight and swung into the saddle. "At the same time I may be able to fix things so he can break out of jail without anybody suspectin' that I helped him do it."

Like a phantom horse and rider the big stallion and the Robin Hood outlaw disappeared silently into the night.

CHAPTER VII

Jailed

HALF an hour later a bright full moon cast a silver glow over the foot-hills and the broad expanse of rangeland to the southwest of the desert. Along a winding road that led to the town of Gold Strike a group of horsemen rode through the night. Sheriff Field and his posse were returning to town with their Indian prisoner.

It had been Warren Hickey who had helped the sheriff round up the posse as soon as the stage had safely returned to Gold Strike after battling the Ghosts of Doom. Reece Sutton and his daughter had gone on back to the hotel and were staying in town for the night. Neil Ramsey had quietly disappeared after they had reached the town.

For hours the posse had searched in vain for the hooded band of killers, ending up with only an Indian for a prisoner. Now they walked their mounts, for the horses were tired. Hickey was riding beside the sheriff in the lead. The final vote had proved fifteen to five in favor of arresting the Yaqui and placing him in jail until there was more evidence that he had actually killed Slats Liddell or had been mixed up in the massacre of Gale's trail crew.

The body of the foreman had been tied on one of the horses and two of the posse were riding double. The bodies of the six Leaning G waddies had been left out on the desert until Joe Gale could send a ranch wagon out in the morning to collect the dead men.

"Somethin' shore has gotta be done about these Ghosts of Doom," said Warren Hickey as he rode beside the sheriff. "First they stole Joe Gale's trail herd, and killed his men, then they attached the stage. All in one day."

"There's a heap more them sidewinders may have been doin' that we don't know about yet," said the sheriff. "What about that freight wagon train that was due to arrive in Gold Srike today?"

"The one Ed Craven and his men were bringing in, yuh mean?" asked the gambler.

"That's it," said the young lawman. "What happened to that train? Where are Craven and his men? We shore didn't see any signs of them out on the desert. Is this gonna be another wagon train that has just disappeared in thin air?"

"Hope not," said Hickey.

The two men lapsed into silence as a solitary horseman rode out from the brush onto the road ahead of them. In the bright moonlight they could see that he was a tall man mounted on a roan. As he caught sight of the posse he swung his horse to the right and rode toward the sheriff's men.

"Reckonize him?" asked the sheriff. "Looks like a stranger to me."

"I've seen him before," stated Warren Hickey coldly. "It's a feller named Wayne Morgan. The jasper was on the stage with us and run away as soon as the Ghosts of Doom attacked the coach. I suspect that hombre is just plain yellow."

"Howdy, gents," said Morgan as he reached the cavalcade of horsemen. "Yuh mind if I ride along with yuh,

seeing as it looks like yore headin' for town."

"Hello, Morgan," said Hickey dryly. "Mebbe yuh might feel safer riding with us."

"Shore would." Morgan's tone was serene. He realized from the gambler's attitude that Warren Hickey did not like him, but he didn't let it bother him. "Shore was glad to see you and the rest of the folks on the Overland finally drove off them hooded jaspers, Hickey."

"Thought yuh said yuh were goin' to get help," said Hickey.

MORGAN had turned his roan and was now riding alone on the gambler's right while the sheriff was on Hickey's left. Behind them rode Joe Gale and Alex Page with the rest of the posse bringing up in the rear. Blue Hawk's hands had not been tied, and he was guiding his own horse, but he was surrounded on all sides by the men of the posse. It was a relief to the Yaqui to see Wayne Morgan join the posse and ride along with the leaders.

"I did go for help," said Morgan. "But I hadn't no more than reached the foot-hills when I seen a jasper riding hell-bent for election across the desert. This hombre was all dressed in black and wearing a mask. I figgered he might be coming to help them Ghosts of Doom that was attacking the stage, so I—"

"That was the Masked Rider," said Hickey impatiently. "He came to our help, and thanks to him we were able to drive the raiders off."

"The Masked Rider!" exclaimed Morgan in surprise. "So that's who he was! I followed him, aiming to take a shot at him soon as I found out if he really was workin' with them ghosts. Then when I seen him helping yuh all to fight off them hooded men I was mighty glad I hadn't downed him."

"Yuh want to know what I think, Morgan?" said Warren Hickey curtly. "I think yuh're the damnedest coward and liar I ever run across."

A flash of anger swept over Wayne Morgan as he heard the bitter words of the big gambler. He found it difficult to control his temper. For a man of his indomitable courage to be accused of cowardice rankled. It was all he could do to keep from forcing the issue by challenging Warren Hickey to fight him with fists or guns. Yet he realized that by doing so he would gain nothing, and he had told a pretty lame story. He had no desire to make any of these men his enemies.

As the Masked Rider, one of the cattlemen in this region had asked his aid in tracking down the Ghosts of Doom. He was trying his best to learn all he could regarding the various men he had met, for he was sure that among them there must be some who were acting as spies for the hooded men.

"I ain't anxious to pick a fight with yuh here and now, Hickey," he said, his tone cold and hard. "But some time I aim to make yuh eat them words."

"Reckon mebbe you two had better quit arguin'," said Sheriff Bob Field quietly. He had noticed the steel in Morgan's tone, and in the estimation of the young lawman the tall stranger did not look or act as if he would stand much fighting talk from Hickey. "Drop back with the rest of the men until Hickey kind of cools off, Morgan."

"Yuh're the boss, Sheriff," agreed Morgan.

HE slowed the roan and dropped back so that he was riding along beside Alex Page and Joe Gale. The sheriff and Hickey, talking earnestly, rode on ahead so that their conversation could not be overheard. Morgan realized they were discussing him.

"The Indian a prisoner?" he asked Page conversationally.

"Yuh're darn right," exclaimed Joe Gale before Page could answer. "This

Chief Red Fox drygulched one of my men. Shot him in the back and killed him."

"Then the Indian shore must have had a change of heart since I seen him out on the desert," observed Morgan.

"What d'yuh mean?" The old rancher peered at him, trying to study the lean face of the stranger, even though Page was riding between them and Morgan was some distance away. "Yuh know something about how Slats Liddell got killed?"

"If he was kinda of a thin jigger bossin' a trail herd I know something about how he wasn't killed," said Morgan.

"He was," announced Gale quickly. "What about it?"

Morgan hesitated an instant before he answered. He realized that in his effort to clear Blue Hawk he had said more than was wise. He couldn't explain that as the Masked Rider he had found Slats Liddell dying of thirst out on the desert and the foreman had told him of the attack on the trail herd. To do so would reveal his identity as the Robin Hood outlaw.

On the other hand, if he told of having seen the Yaqui come to Liddell's rescue, these men would think it very strange. He was quite sure now that the Ghosts of Doom had killed the six Leaning G men and stolen the trail herd before the same raiders had attacked the stage. Anyone able to check up on that would realize that it was impossible for Morgan to have been on the Overland and also to have seen what happened to Gale's men.

"I seen this Indian and a thin waddy riding double out on the desert," said Morgan finally. "I asked them what had happened. The thin-faced man said he was the foreman of the Leaning G—that he had been bossin' a trail herd headed for the railroad on the other side of the desert. They was attacked by the hooded jaspers and all the men with Liddell killed. He got creased by a bullet that knocked him

Warren Hickey

off his hoss and he was unconscious when he hit the ground. The Ghosts of Doom just left him there, figgering he was another dead man. After awhile he come out of it and was wandering around on the desert when the Indian found him."

"So that was it," said Joe Gale. "That's mighty interestin'."

The owner of the Leaning G abruptly touched spurs to his horse and rode ahead to join the sheriff and Hickey. All three men talked earnestly.

Ahead there was a glow in the sky, and Morgan realized that they were approaching the little cowtown called Gold Strike. The tired horses of the posse quickened their gait as they knew they were returning home where they might rest, and where there would be food and water.

Morgan continued to ride beside Alex Page. He found the rancher friendly enough and the two men talked as they jogged along. Morgan learned that Page was the owner of the AP spread, and he was a big, gentle sort of man whose one real interest in life was his six-year-old boy, Sonny.

"Shore is a mighty smart kid," said

Page proudly. "Ain't but six years old and he can fork leather with the best of them. Got him a little pony of his own last year, and yuh oughta see that boy ride. Smart, too."

ALEX PAGE went on to relate clever things that his son had said and done. To Morgan they seemed about the way a bright six year old would talk and act, but he realized that the rancher was a doting father and that in Page's estimation there never could be any boy just like his son.

The little band of horsemen reached Gold Strike and rode on along the dusty street of the little cowtown. Lights gleamed in the windows of the buildings. There were people moving restlessly up and down the plank walks that lined each side of the street. Horses stood at the hitching rails in front of the hotel, the two saloons and the general store. The sight of a little quick lunch place reminded Morgan that he had not eaten since breakfast early that morning.

"Hey, Osborne," Alex Page called back over his shoulder to a blond young man who had been riding with the posse. "Looks like yore store is doin' a good business."

"Shore does," said the blond man. "I'll be leavin' yuh here." He swung his horse out of line and dismounted at the hitching rail in front of the general store.

"Pete Osborne runs and owns the general store," Page told Morgan. "Good boy, but mebbe a mite too romantic. He's plumb loco over Reece Sutton's gal, Norma. Which same ain't pleasin' Neil Ramsey any. He's right smitten himself. And just to make it more complicated like, the sheriff shore gets moonstruck when that gal is around."

"I can't blame any of them," said Morgan. "I've met Miss Sutton and she's as pretty as a little red wagon."

Men gathered in excited groups along the street as they recognized the posse. Some of them called out questions to the sheriff, but Bob Field paid little attention to them as he led the men with him on down the street to the far end of the town where stood the sheriff's office and the local jail.

Here they halted and swung stiffly out of their saddles. Most of them tied their mounts to the hitching rail by the bridle rein. Morgan fastened his roan at the end of the line.

Two of the men took the Yaqui by either arm and started to lead him into the jail building.

"Wait a minute," said Sheriff Field as he faced Blue Hawk. "I want to ask Chief Red Fox a question."

Warren Hickey and Joe Gale were close behind the young lawman. The gambler's strong face was expressionless, but there was an air of excitement about the old rancher.

"You ask, and Chief Red Fox answer," promised the Yaqui.

"All right," said Field. The sheriff pointed to Morgan who was standing close by, listening with interest. "Did yuh ever see this man before?"

"Red Fox never see him before," stated Blue Hawk firmly.

"That's shore strange," said Joe Gale, smiling grimly. "Morgan just told me a little while ago that he run across yuh out on the desert just after yuh rescued Slats Liddell."

"Maybe Chief Red Fox make mistake," said the Yaui quickly.

"Yuh both did!" Abruptly his gun appeared in the sheriff's hand, the heavy Colt covering Morgan. "Yuh been doin' too much lyin' to suit me, Morgan. I'm arrestin' you on suspicion, along with the Indian."

"Wait a minute, Sheriff," protested Alex Page. "Morgan seems like a right nice jasper. Ain't yuh actin' a little hasty like?"

"You keep out of this, Page," said Hickey angrily. "The sheriff knows what he's doing."

"He shore does," exclaimed Joe

Gale. "And I'm siding him if it comes to a showdown."

THERE was an interruption.

"What's the trouble, gentlemen?" demanded a suave voice as a tall man immaculately dressed in whipcord riding trousers, expensive new boots and a white silk shirt pushed his way to the front of the crowd that was beginning to gather. "Is this man a member of that band of hooded killers who have been terrorizing this part of the country?" He glanced at Morgan. "His face does not appear to be familiar."

"Reckon the sheriff can handle this without any help from an Eastern dude like you, Leland Blunt," said Gale, scorn in his voice.

"Sorry, Blunt," snapped the sheriff. "But Gale is right. This ain't none of yore business."

"I apologize." Blunt bowed and moved back. "I'm afraid that my curiosity got the better of me."

Wayne Morgan found himself studying the tall Easterner with interest. He was a good judge of human nature and he was certain that beneath his suave exterior this Leland Blunt might prove dangerous.

"Take the prisoners inside," ordered the sheriff. He looked at Morgan, his eyes hard. "If yuh got anything to say, Morgan, let's hear it."

"Just one thing," said Morgan quietly. "I shore hope yuh feed the prisoners in yore jail, Sheriff. I'm so hungry I could eat a steer."

"Yuh'll get yore supper all right." The sheriff grinned and dropped his gun back into the holster as some of the other men slid Morgan's two Colts out of leather without any protest from the tall, dark-haired man. "And that goes for Chief Red Fox, too."

"Not like to eat hoofs and horns," said the Yaqui placidly. "Just nice steak will do good."

CHAPTER VIII

Jailbirds

SHERIFF BOB FIELD led the way into his office, a big room in the front part of the square adobe building. Beyond this was a door opening into a corridor that led to the jail proper.

The young lawman dismissed the posse, and only Hickey, Gale, Page, and two strange men with the badges of deputies followed him into the office. Morgan looked at these two men with interest. They had not been riding with the posse. One of them was extremely stout and the other very thin.

"So yuh aim to hold this jasper and the Indian as prisoners, that it, Bob?" asked the stout deputy. He spoke in

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a voice that reminded Morgan of an old accordion that was a little on the wheezy side.

"That's right, Sorrow," said the thin deputy before the sheriff could answer. "Yuh should be able to figger that out all by yoreself."

"Well, I don't need you to do my thinkin' for me, Muddy," protested the fat man. "What happened when the sheriff left us in charge of things here in town today while he was out with the posse? All day long yuh kept askin', 'What do we do now?' "

"Any of you hombres got a plug of chewin' tobacco?" asked Morgan. "Get my jaws to working, and I'll feel plumb at home."

"Shore." The fat deputy grinned and drew a plug of heavy, black tobacco out of his pocket. He opened a penknife and sliced off a chunk which he handed to the prisoner. "Here yuh are, feller."

"Sorrow, you lock up the prisoners," ordered the sheriff. "Muddy, go get 'em a couple of good meals."

Morgan apparently placed the tobacco in his mouth and began to chew, but he actually palmed it, and dropped it into his pocket when no one was looking.

"Let's go!" The fat deputy motioned to Morgan and Blue Hawk to lead the way through the door into the jail, and he had his hand on the butt of his gun. "Remember, just 'cause we treat prisoners white around here that ain't no reason for you jaspers to get any foolish notions."

Morgan and the Yaqui obediently entered the jail corridor. They sensed the strain all three of the lawmen were under, and realized that the tempers of Field and his deputies were short. The sheriff stood in the doorway watching as "Sorrow" went to a steel-barred cell door and unlocked it with one of a bunch of keys he took from his pocket.

The light gleamed down on Bob Field's tired face. He looked as though he had gone a long time without much sleep. His clothing was thick with dust. Morgan felt a touch of pity and sympathy for this harassed young lawman, but there was nothing he could say now.

"In there." Sorrow nodded to Morgan. "That's where yuh're spendin' the night."

Morgan walked carelessly to the door of the cell. Then he suddenly swung around. He saw the sheriff and the stout deputy grow tense. Their hands were close to their guns.

"I don't like this!" Morgan growled angrily. "There ain't no reason for yuh arresting me, Sheriff, and yuh know it! You are just pickin' on me and the Indian because yuh realize the folks around here are getting proddy. Yuh figgered yuh had to do something to keep them quiet, so yuh throw a couple of strangers in jail."

"I know what I'm doin', Morgan," said Field, and the young sheriff's tone was weary. "Yuh lied to us when yuh was riding with the posse. Mebbe yuh had a reason for doing that—and if so I aim to find out what it was!"

"While yuh're discoverin' things," suggested Morgan in faint irony, "why don't yuh find the hideout of the Ghosts of Doom?"

HE stood on the threshold of the cell as he spoke, his right hand hidden from view, his strong fingers working busily. Field scowled, and Morgan knew that shot had told. Strangely, the sheriff did not flare up in anger, although the deputy snorted as he motioned the prisoner backward and clanged shut the steel-barred door.

"Haven't we been lookin' for that hideout day after day?" asked Field slowly. "Mebbe yuh got some ideas on that subject?"

"Shore, I have," Morgan answered promptly, his words and tone halting the deputy's hand on the key in the very act of shooting the bolt. "Ain't none of yuh even thought of Dyke

Tyler's castle?"

The hopeful light in the sheriff's eyes died. The fat deputy guffawed.

"Of course, we have," said the sheriff. "I took a posse there just a few days back. Dyke's men was workin' in his mine, but he let us look all through the whole place. We didn't see nothin' suspicious at the castle. Besides, why should an old prospector who's struck it rich let a bunch of hooded killers make his place their hideout?"

"I don't know," admitted Morgan, frowning. "And everybody around here seems to know Dyke Tyler. Yuh all seem to think he's plumb honest."

"He is," chimed in the fat deputy emphatically. "They ain't no doubt about that. Why, since he made his strike, Dyke has helped everybody around here. He's even loaned money to some of the ranchers from time to time. He's rich as all get out. What would he gain by sidin' with a bunch of raiders? Shucks, he spends money like water."

"Uh-huh," said Morgan solemnly, gripping the bars of his door and fixing the man called Sorrow with his eye. "I've run across fellers like that before. They spend money right and left until—all of a sudden—there ain't no money left to spend."

"But Dyke has a payin' claim," protested the sheriff. "I know that." He scowled again and made an impatient gesture at his deputy. "We'll argue about it in the mornin', Morgan. Hurry up, Sorrow, and lock up that Injun."

The deputy closed his opening mouth and twisted at the key. This implement would only make an eighth of a turn, an indication that he had already locked the door. Shaking the barrier as a quick test, Sorrow withdrew the key and moved along the corridor to open the adjoining cell. A moment later the Yaqui was lodged in the cubicle next to Morgan's. The Robin Hood outlaw and his faithful servitor were the only two prisoners in the jail.

"Reckon that settles that, Bob," said Sorrow, heading back toward the office, the keys jingling in his fat hand. "I'm mighty anxious to hear what you and the posse found out about them hooded skunks today."

"Not much," began Sheriff Field as the door at the end of the corridor closed behind the two men.

FOR a few minutes the two prisoners remained silent when they found themselves alone in the big jail. They wanted to be certain that there was no one listening before they spoke. They had both accepted their arrest passively because neither of them had the slightest intention of remaining in jail any longer than could be helped. If there was any possible way of escaping without resorting to violence, Blue Hawk knew his companion would find it. The Indian was content to follow the lead of this man who never had failed him.

Blue Hawk began examining his cell. He found that the steel-barred door was strong, and the lock a substantial one. There was a single barred window at the rear of the cell, but this was too small for a man to crawl through even if he succeeded in getting the bars loose from the hard cement with which the adobe walls had been reinforced.

By peering through his door the Yaqui found that all of the cells in the jail were apparently alike. A canvas-covered cot was the only furnishing each possessed, and they were bleak and damp and dismal. Two oil lamps hanging from chains that fastened into the ceiling of the corridor were the only illumination of the place.

In the cell next to Blue Hawk on the south side of the jail Wayne Morgan had stretched out lazily on the cot. He was completely relaxed and resting comfortably as he produced

yellow papers and a tobacco sack and rolled himself a quirly.

"What are yuh so restless about, Hawk?" he asked. "Yuh sound like a packrat in a lawyer's desk."

The Indian became as still as a shadow at Morgan's chuckle. He slowly approached the dividing bars.

"Si, Senor," he said in amazement. "This is a joke to you? I am sorry that Senor Liddell was killed. And I am sorry I was so dumb that it made sheriff arrest you."

"That's all right," said Morgan. "Forget it. We can get out of here when I figger it is the right time to do it. We'll talk later."

"But how, Senor?" demanded Blue Hawk. "The locks on doors of these cells are very good ones. I can't get mine open."

"Never mind how I aim to do it," said Morgan. "I'm shore it will work. Besides, we might as well let them feed us here like they promised. I'm right hungry, and I reckon you are too, Hawk."

"That is right, Senor," said the Yaqui. And then dryly, "But still I do not want to eat horns and hoofs."

They lapsed into silence as they heard the door at the end of the corridor open. Both men went to the doors of their cells and peered through the bars. The fat deputy loomed into view with his gun in one hand and a laden tray in the other. Behind him came the thin man and he was carrying a second tray.

"Here's yore supper," announced Muddy as he paused in front of Morgan's cell and puffed and grunted as he squatted to slide the tray through the slot under the skeleton door.

Morgan picked up the tray and placed it on the cot. As he did so Sorrow backed away and narrowly watched his assistant slide the second tray of food to the Indian.

"Yuh shore are a right cautious gent." Morgan grinned as he returned to the door of the cell and peered out through the bars at the deputy. "Got an up-to-date jail house, too. D'yuh mind if I ask yuh somethin' personal?"

"Can't tell whether I do or not until yuh ask it," wheezed the fat man. "Go ahead."

"Is Sorrow all the name yuh got?"

"Nope," answered the deputy. "My name is Ainsworth Killigrew Boswell. Folks started callin' me Sorrow a long time ago because they figgered it was plumb pitiful for a jasper to be saddled with a handle like that."

"Guess they were right at that," agreed Morgan, nodding. "But it ain't hard to guess the last name of this thin hairpin."

"Bet yuh can't guess it," said Sorrow Boswell. "Bet yuh fifty cents!"

"It's a bet." Morgan smiled. "His name is Muddy Waters."

"Aw, that ain't fair!" protested Boswell, digging reluctantly in his pocket. "Somebody told yuh."

"No, they didn't," said Morgan. "Don't yuh know that most jaspers named Waters usually get 'Muddy' for a nickname? Just like they tack on 'Dusty' to fellers named Rhodes and the like."

AT this Muddy Waters blinked and gulped noisily. "Well, I'll be danged," he said. "I never thought of that, Sorrow."

"You never think of anything—until afterwards," rejoined Sorrow. "We'll be back in about half an hour to get them dishes, Morgan. Here's yore four bits."

The two prisoners seated themselves on their bunks and began to eat as the corridor door closed behind the two deputies.

There was a thick steak on each tray, fried potatoes, peas, bread and butter, a tall glass of beer, and a piece of apple pie for dessert.

"They shore gave us a meal, Hawk," said Morgan as he cut into the steak. "No bread and water in this jail."

"Good!" muttered the Yaqui, his mouth full. "Taste fine."

They ate in silence after that and cleaned their plates of every bit of food. The beer also was appreciated. Half an hour later the two deputies returned to get the trays. They were wary of the prisoners, Waters standing with hand on gun while Boswell collected the trays Morgan and Blue Hawk shoved out under the doors.

"That was a fine meal," said Morgan. "Best jail I ever stopped at. There's one thing that's worryin' me though. Did somebody think to take care of my hoss? I left him out at the hitchin' rail."

"Don't yuh worry about that roan," said Muddy Waters. "Fed and watered him myownself just like I done the Indian's gray. They're unsaddled and out in the corral where we keep our own hosses in back of the jail."

"Thanks," said Morgan. "I'm a heap obliged."

The two deputies departed and again the prisoners were left alone. For a time they sat silently on their bunks. Finally Morgan yawned. It had been a busy day. He was tired.

"Hawk," he called softly.

"What, Senor?"

"No use in our trying to get out of here until later tonight," said Morgan. "There's too many people roaming around outside now."

Through the windows of their cells they could hear the sounds of the night life of the little cowtown going full blast. There seemed to be an undercurrent of hysteria about the feverish activities, as though the citizens of Gold Strike and the surrounding cattle country realized this might be their last fling. Tomorrow they might die beneath roaring guns and so tonight they lived.

To the ears of the prisoners came the thudding of hoofs along the street, the pounding of booted feet on the plank walks, voices and an occasional loud masculine laugh. Faintly there sounded the rattle of chips and the clinking of glasses from Warren Hickey's big saloon next to the jail.

"What we do then?" asked Blue Hawk as he thought over what Wayne Morgan had said a moment ago about not trying to escape as yet.

"I don't know about you," said Morgan as he stretched out at full length on the bunk, using his Stetson for a pillow. "But I aim to have a good sleep."

"Blue Hawk do the same thing," announced the Yaqui.

Silence hung over the interior of the jail as the two men drifted into deep, dreamless slumber.

[*Turn page*]

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CHAPTER IX

The Mysterious Intruder

MORGAN awoke with a start and remained motionless on his cell cot, listening tensely. No longer did he hear sounds of activities in the street outside the jail building. Evidently it was very late and the citizens of the little town had finally called it a night and were all in their beds sleeping peacefully. Morgan sensed danger in the hush that hung over the jail.

The oil lamps were still burning out in the corridor, but their flickering light was dim and shadows were deep near the door of the front office. Morgan sat up silently on his bunk, and then became very much alert. From the shadow he heard the faint jingle of keys. Beyond the bars of his cell he saw a vague form approaching. It materialized into a tall man with a bandanna mask hiding his face and a long black slicker covering the clothes that he was wearing.

Morgan caught a glimpse of steel in the man's right hand and realized that he was gripping the haft of a long and vicious-looking knife. It was obvious that the masked man planned to enter the cell and murder the prisoner while he slept.

Morgan unfastened one of his empty leather holsters from his gunbelt and removed it. He stood up, holding the holster so that it looked like a gun in the semi-darkness, and advanced noiselessly toward the door of the cell.

"Yuh open that door and yuh'll get a bullet in yuh," he said softly, but his tone was hard, and he sounded as if he meant just what he had voiced. "Drop that knife!"

The masked man started so violently that he dropped the knife. He cursed as it hit the floor of the corridor with a little thud. Then the intruder began to back away. He seemed anxious to escape without detection—now that Morgan was awake and capable of an outcry. From the denser shadows near the closed office door he spoke in a harsh whisper.

"When the sheriff lets yuh go, feller, you hit the grit and get outa this country pronto," he snarled. "Leave or die!"

With that rather melodramatic threat, the masked intruder was gone, gliding swiftly through into the sheriff's office and closing the door behind him. Morgan waited silently for a few minutes as he carefully replaced the empty holster on his gun-belt. He speculated on the possible identity of this curious caller who moved undetected through the sheriff's office.

At last he reached out and grasped the handle of the steel-barred door of his cell. Tugging down on it to draw the latch-bolt, he easily thrust the barrier open and stepped out into the corridor. The door had not been locked!

Morgan was not at all surprised at this. When he had first entered the cell he had inserted the piece of chewing tobacco given him by the fat deputy into the keeper of the lock in the metal doorframe. In front of the gummy stuff he had pressed in a .45-caliber bullet from his cartridge belt. Then, just as the fat deputy had made to turn the key in the lock, Morgan had distracted his attention.

A moment later, when Sorrow tried to turn the key, the bolt had pressed against the cartridge, and the deputy automatically thought he had already locked the door, and removed the key. Morgan's only worry thereafter was to keep anybody from trying the door. Had the deputy turned the handle when he shook the door he would have discovered the subterfuge instantly.

"THAT you, Senor?" demanded Blue Hawk in a whisper as he

stood at the door of his cell. The Yaqui had heard the voices of Morgan and the man in the bandanna mask.

"Right, Hawk," said Morgan softly as he went to the door of Blue Hawk's cell. "I got my door unlocked all right, but I'm gonna have to get the jail keys to get you out, too."

"Masked man have keys," said the Yaqui shrewdly. "So he must know sheriff and deputies. How you get cell door unlocked?"

Alex Page

Morgan explained how he had used the cartridge and tobacco to prevent the lock bolt from sliding all the way in. Blue Hawk listened with interest and admiration. As he talked, Morgan was untying the neckerchief that hung around his neck. He felt that he might be able to use that big square of blue cloth. He picked up the knife the masked man had dropped and thrust it into his belt.

With a word more to the Yaqui, he advanced silently and cautiously to the door at the end of the corridor. He knew the man in the mask might be lingering nearby and he was ready for trouble. Carefully he opened the door a trifle and peered into the sheriff's office beyond.

Sorrow Boswell was slumped back in a chair, his feet propped up on a desk. The fat deputy was snoring peacefully. There was no one else in the office, and the jail keys were on the desk near Boswell's feet.

Morgan crept forward, the neckerchief ready in his hands, until he was directly behind Boswell. He slapped the blue cloth over the fat deputy's eyes and clamped a hand over the stout man's mouth to keep him from crying out as he awoke. As Boswell opened his mouth, Morgan stuffed the man's own neckerchief into it. A moment later the deputy was blindfolded and thoroughly gagged.

"Don't move or we'll put a bullet in yuh," said Morgan in a harsh voice that was nothing like his usual low drawl. "All right, men. I'll keep him covered while yuh tie him up."

He was trying to create the impression in the deputy's mind that two or three men had him captured, and apparently Boswell believed it, for he hastily thrust his arms high in the air and sat motionless in the chair.

There were several guns hanging on pegs driven into the walls of the sheriff's office. Morgan hastily found his own two treasured Colts and thrust them into the empty holsters on his lean thighs. There was a coil of rope hanging on one of the pegs.

"Stand up!" he ordered, and Boswell got to his feet. "Put yore hands behind yore back."

The fat deputy stood passively as Morgan swiftly tied his hands behind him.

"All right, boys," said Morgan as he finished. "Now get the jail keys." He picked them up so that the deputy could clearly hear the jingle as he did so. "Sit down!"

He pushed the blindfolded man back into the chair and then bound Boswell's feet so that he could not move.

"We get the prisoners now, Boss?" asked Morgan in a high, whining voice.

"Shore, and hurry," he said in the harsh tone he had been using before. "We'll teach Morgan and that Indian they can't come spying on us like they done."

With the keys in his hand he dashed back along the corridor and unlocked the door of Blue Hawk's cell. There was need for haste for there was a chance of Sheriff Field or "Muddy" Waters returning to the jail building at any moment. It might be that the three men planned to guard the prisoners in shifts of a few hours' duty for each of the lawmen. Since Boswell had been sleeping when Morgan had discovered him it was evident that he had been on the job for some time. That meant the masked man could have been a stranger who had sneaked in.

"Don't talk, Hawk," said Morgan as he led the way back to the sheriff's office. "I got that fat deputy tied up. Blindfolded him so that he didn't see me. He thinks a bunch of the Ghosts of Doom came to get us, I reckon."

The Yaqui nodded. He went to a gun rack along the wall and found his rifle and Morgan's Winchester among the other guns. There was an oil lamp burning on the desk. Morgan blew up the light, and the two men stepped out of the dark office onto the main street of the cowtown.

ALL of the buildings were dark, and they saw no sign of life as they looked up and down the dusty street. Like shadows they glided around the side of the jail building, heading for the cavvy corral back of the place. Morgan mentally thanked his foresight in asking the deputy what had happened to the roan.

They reached the corral and found their saddles and bridles in a small harness shed. Quickly they roped and saddled their mounts, coiled their lariats and swung into leather, constantly alert for the first sign of danger.

"Let's go, Hawk," Morgan said, and rode out through the corral gate. He reached down and pushed it shut after the Yaqui came through the entrance on his gray.

There was a stretch of open country beyond the corral, and the pair headed in that direction, avoiding riding along the street of the town where there was danger of detection. They held their mounts to a walk until they had left the little cowtown some distance behind them. Then the gray and the roan broke into a gallop.

Both horses were well rested, though the roan was a bit fresher than Blue Hawk's gray, for Morgan had not ridden his mount very far the previous day. It had been Midnight that had been worked hard in wandering over the desert. Blue Hawk quickly related all that had happened to him the evening before.

"What we do now, Senor?" asked the Yaqui as they rode on through the night.

"Head for the hideout," answered Morgan. "Reckon yuh better keep out of sight as much as possible from now on, Hawk. Come morning I aim to find Les Dabney's spread. I remember he asked the help of the Masked Rider in tracking down them hooded coyotes who are raising such a rumpus out on the desert."

"Ghosts of Doom won't stay out on desert," said Blue Hawk. "Soon they will start raiding ranches and towns around here, too."

"Wouldn't surprise me none if they did," Morgan said. "There's one thing I can't understand, and that is why nobody seems to believe that Dyke Tyler's castle might be the hideout for the hooded men."

"Ghosts must know just when a trail herd is going to start across the desert," said the Yaqui. "They also knew the right time to attack the overland stage."

"Shore, and from what I can gather, they know all about them two freight

wagon trains that has disappeared so mysterious-like," agreed Morgan. "There's only one answer, Hawk, and that is there is somebody around here working under cover as a spy for the Ghosts of Doom."

"But who, Senor?" demanded the Yaqui as they reached their hideout back in the mountains and slid out of their saddles. "You suspect anyone?"

"I ain't certain yet," said Morgan as he seated himself on a rock and thoughtfully rolled a quirly. "There's a lot of hombres around here I would like to know more about. Warren Hickey is one of them. As yuh know, we heard there was trouble in this part of the country when we was way over to the west of here."

THE Yaqui nodded.

"Of course, Senor," Blue Hawk said. "So when we come here early yesterday morning you ride on stage as Morgan, and I went on ahead with horses. Then I found hideout near where stage route led across the desert."

"Right. There's Reece Sutton and his daughter, Norma. Warren Hickey and Neil Ramsey all got on the stage at Gold Strike, aimin' to go across the desert to Brushville. Looks like they changed their mind about making the trip when the coach was attacked by the Ghosts of Doom."

"You told me this old prospector who owns the big castle acted like he did not like Neil Ramsey," said the Yaqui. "What you think is the reason for that?"

"I don't know." Morgan smoked thoughtfully for a moment or two. "Sheriff Field is young and kind of pig-headed, but he seems honest enough. I don't figger he could be working with the hooded killers. This Easterner, Leland Blunt, that we run into in town tonight interests me. I want to know more about him. Alex Page, now, seems a right nice sort of hombre. Joe Gale is a hot-headed old-timer, but he's got brains. He told the sheriff everything I said, I'll bet, and that's why Field asked yuh if yuh knew me. Yuh did the right thing to deny it, but these jaspers ain't so dim-witted. It shore made me out a liar."

"I'm still sorry about that, Senor."

"Never mind," said Morgan, chuckling in remembrance. "Here's the way I plan it now. As soon as it is daylight I want yuh to head for Tyler's castle. You keep watch there without being seen, and keep a good lookout to see if any hooded men show up around there. That place is a logical headquarters in spite of what Sheriff Field says."

"What you do, Senor?" asked the Yaqui.

"First I aim to go to the Bar D and see Les Dabney. Without saying too much, I'm gonna make out like I'm a lawman working under cover and that I need his help. Mebbe I'll let him think I'm a detective sent here by the railroad. If the rustling of trail herds and all keeps up, the railroad's goin' to lose a lot of shippin', so they'd naturally be interested. I—"

Morgan broke off abruptly as Blue Hawk held up his hand in a gesture of silence. For an instant the Yaqui listened intently and then he nodded.

"I was right, Senor," said Blue Hawk. "Hear horses coming this way."

"Then mebbe the Masked Rider better see what it is all about," said Morgan as he leaped to his feet.

He had left the black disguise of the Robin Hood outlaw hidden in his saddle roll which he had placed back in the brush when he had changed horses to join the posse. Now he hastily dressed in the black sombrero, black cloak and mask as Blue Hawk quickly removed the saddle and bridle from the roan and placed them on the black stallion. Both Midnight and the pinto had been hobbled in the usual way, a length of rope holding their two front feet together so that they could not

run, but still could graze and move around.

"Stay here, Hawk," said the Masked Rider as he swung into the kak. "Don't want to risk anyone seein' yuh. Head for the castle at dawn like I told yuh, but leave the roan here so I can get him. I'll meet yuh there tomorrow night."

"Si, Senor."

For an instant the Masked Rider sat in the saddle listening and then as he heard hoofbeats growing louder to the south of him, he headed the black stallion in that direction.

"Good thing he got some sleep in jail," said Blue Hawk as he watched the black-clad horseman disappear into the shadows of the night. "Maybe he will need it before another night comes."

CHAPTER X

Desert Drygulch

DANGER brooded in the deep shadows of the black darkness that came just before dawn. The moon had long since set behind a bank of clouds that piled against the western horizon. The towering mountains assumed eerie, half-hidden forms that seemed like giants ready to pounce on anything that might appear below them.

The Masked Rider reached a trail that was like a huge phantom snake twisting through the shadows all about him. He halted Midnight in the shelter of a boulder that loomed as tall as horse and rider combined.

Far in the distance vague figures moved swiftly as a band of horsemen galloped toward him along the trail. The keen eyes that peered through the holes in the black mask grew hard as the riders drew closer and he saw the pale blotches that indicated these men were wearing the white hoods of the menacing Ghosts of Doom.

They were riding single file, eight men spread out behind their leader. The Masked Rider's lean, strong hands clutched the butts of his guns and tightened, ready for a quick draw. Bitter hatred of these ruthless killers swept over him as he sat motionless, a black-clad figure that might have been part of the black shadows behind the huge rock.

Thudding hoofs rose to a crescendo beat, drumming like the throbbing of drums beating out a grim rhythm of death. The Ghosts of Doom were riding. It was all that the Masked Rider could do to keep from drawing his guns and bringing these men down beneath a withering blast of lead. Yet he realized that by killing this small band here and now he would gain little. These men were obviously bound on some sinister mission and it was up to him to learn their destination.

He let the leader pass and then another and another of the hooded band swept by. They were so close that he could almost reach out and touch them. Memories swept through his mind with lightning swiftness. The people on the stage battling grimly against their foes was again a vivid picture. He saw again the sun-blackened faces of the men who had died fighting for Joe Gale's trail herd. Slats Liddell being saved from the desert, only to be killed by a bullet in his back.

All but the last man of the hooded band had passed, and he was some distance behind the others. Apparently he was having some trouble with his horse.

"Something wrong with my hoss," he shouted to the man directly ahead. "Stone in his shoe mebbe. Go ahead and I'll catch up with yuh later."

With a wave of his hand in acknowledgment, the other man rode on. He swept by the big boulder and disappeared into the night as had the rest of the band. The hooded man who

had been the last in line halted his mount directly opposite the rock and swung out of the saddle.

"Now let's see what's the trouble," he muttered, lifting the horse's left hind foot.

"Reach sky!" snapped a cold voice, and the hooded man felt the hard barrel of a gun thrust into his back.

HE glanced over his shoulder, and then cursed as he saw the tall, black-clad man who stood behind him. A wave of fear and awe swept over him, and he released his grip on his horse's leg to let his arms shoot up in the air.

"The Masked Rider!" he quavered. "You devil! Where did you come from?"

"Turn around!" commanded the black-clad horseman.

The hooded man swung around slowly. As he did so he made a wild effort to draw his gun. He had it half out of the holster when the long barrel of the Masked Rider's Colt crashed down on his head and knocked him to the ground unconscious.

"Shore saved me a lot of trouble by that play," said the Masked Rider. "Thanks. Reckon I'll ride a little way with them sidewinders that went on ahead."

Fortunately his captive had been riding a black horse, and while it was far from the animal that Midnight was, one horse might pass for the other in the blackness of the night. The Masked Rider hastily removed the white hood from the unconscious man. He found the face of a ruthless but unknown gunslick beneath. He tied the man up with a rope that he took from the saddle of the Ghost of Doom's horse. Then he hobbled the horse so that it could not follow.

He took off his black sombrero and fastened on the hood without removing his own mask. Then he removed the man's white shirt and put it on in place of the dark flannel one that he wore. His own hat, shirt and cloak he bundled up and tied to the cantle of his saddle.

"Reckon I'll pass as one of them," he said as he swung into the saddle. Midnight snorted as though he considered his rider a strange-looking object. "Never mind how I look, Midnight. Let's get going."

The black stallion went racing along the trail. Throughout the west there was no fleeter horse, and Midnight's flashing hoofs ate up the distance between him and the horses ahead. Within twenty minutes the Masked Rider saw the last man in line of the Ghosts of Doom. The hooded man glanced back as he heard the thundering hoofs, and then faced forward again as he saw the rider who approached was one of his own band. In this manner the band rode onward for a time.

"Halt!" the leader called and held up his arm as he reined in his horse and waited for the rest of the men to join him.

"Here's where we separate," he announced when the rest of the band had reached him and halted their mounts. "Mister Jones says there ain't gonna be nothing doin' tomorrow. He'll get

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word to yuh same as usual when he needs yuh again. Yuh better remove yore hoods, and change yore shirts now, men."

The Masked Rider cursed under his breath. If he removed the hood he was wearing they would see his mask, and even if he took that off at the same time they would see that he was a stranger. Obviously he had joined the murderous crew at the end instead of the start of some nefarious business.

There was a red glow in the east and the dawn might break through at any moment. He did not want to battle these men; it was not that he was is he least afraid to face odds of nine to one, but they were obviously only a lesser part of the hooded band who had been working under cover. Perhaps they were even men he would recognize once they unmasked, and more use to him alive than dead.

REALIZING that he had to do something quickly, covertly, he drew out his clasp knife and opened the blade. He stuck Midnight's rump with the point of the knife. The blade did not even pierce the skin, but the black was a pampered animal and his dignity had been offended. He expressed his disapproval by giving one terrific snort and then going into the most realistic imitation of a bucking horse that the Masked Rider had ever encountered. He sun-fished, crow-hopped, reared up on his hind legs, then came down with a thud that jarred his rider from head to foot.

"That hoss of Johnny's is actin' up again," shouted one of the hooded men. "Look at him buck!"

At this moment, covertly urged by the Masked Rider, Midnight started to run. The Masked Rider let him have a free rein. This was just what he wanted the black stallion to do. It was the simplest way to get free from the Ghosts of Doom without them realizing he had done so deliberately to keep from revealing his identity by removing his borrowed hood.

As soon as he was out of sight of the band of hooded men the Masked Rider began to talk soothingly to the black stallion. Midnight gradually quieted and finally slowed down to a walk. When they had traveled some distance from where he had left the small band of raiders the black-clad horseman halted his mount near the mouth of a small ravine.

"Sorry I had to get yuh so worked up, Midnight," he apologized as he swung out of the saddle, "but there weren't no other way of doing it."

He removed the white hood and shirt and again put on his own dark flannel shirt, black cloak and black sombrero. Gone was the ninth of the hooded men and in his place was the Masked Rider, ready for action.

"Don't reckon I'll have any more use for these," he said grimly as he picked up the white shirt and hood and rolled them into a small bundle. "But I'll just keep them handy, anyway." He tied them to his saddle by one of the latigo strings.

The crimson glow in the east grew brighter and then vanished as the morning sun peeked redly over the horizon. Another day had dawned in the desert country. Like footlights slowly illuminating some vast stage setting, the sunlight spread over the rugged terrain.

The Masked Rider sat motionless in the saddle for a moment, thinking about the eight hooded men that he had left in a ravine to the east of him. They had been just about to remove their hoods when he had departed so hastily. Now he was sorry that he had not lingered long enough to try and see their faces, dangerous as such a procedure would have been. All the hooded riders couldn't be utter strangers. Some of them were bound to be men known hereabouts.

"Could be men from Gold Strike," he muttered thoughtfully. "Or even waddies from some of the spreads

around here. Ain't no doubt in my mind that bunch has been working with the Ghosts of Doom under cover. No use trying to follow them now. One thing shore, though. I never seen that jasper before that I knocked out and took his hood away."

He remembered that the leader of the little band of raiders had said Mr. Jones would get in touch with them.

"Reckon this Mister Jones must be the head man of this hooded outfit," reflected the Masked Rider. "And I'll make a good bet that ain't nothin' like his real name."

"Hands up!" suddenly shouted a voice behind him. "One false move and I will kill yuh a hundred and fifty ways."

THE Masked Rider nudged Midnight with his right knee, and the black stallion whirled sharply. The black-clad horseman found himself facing a small, gray-bearded man who was covering him with a rifle and advancing from a cluster of boulders.

"Dyke Tyler!" he exclaimed, recognizing the old prospector. "Thought we was friends! What's the idea of drawing down on me thisaway?"

"Friends," muttered Tyler, a wild expression in his eyes. "And what is friendship but a name, a charm that lulls to sleep." The old man staggered, and then straightened, aiming the rifle at the Masked Rider's heart. "I ordered Tom Malory to kill yuh. Why don't nobody do what I tell them?"

"Yuh're drunk again," said the Masked Rider firmly. "Put down that rifle before yuh get hurt." His right-hand gun flashed into his fingers in a lightninglike draw.

He sent a bullet whistling close to Dyke Tyler's right ear. The old prospector uttered a howl of fear and let the rifle drop to the ground as though it had suddenly burned his fingers. He turned and scuttled away like a frightened crab.

The Masked Rider grinned as he rode after the old man. Apparently Dyke Tyler was not as dangerous as he had seemed at first. The black-clad horseman still had his gun in his hand as he rode through the entrance to the ravine in pursuit of the owner of Crow's-nest Castle.

As he came out onto a stretch of flat ground beyond the gully, the Masked Rider descried a mounted man galloping toward him. Even from the distance there was no mistaking that horse and rider. It was Neil Ramsey on his palomino.

The Robin Hood outlaw felt a bit foolish as the young ranch owner drew closer. He was sure that it must look to Ramsey as though he were trying to ride down the old prospector. What made it worse was that Tyler was unarmed and the Masked Rider had a gun in his hand.

"What's going on here?" demanded Ramsey as both he and the Masked Rider halted their horses not far from each other. "Why're yuh chasing Tyler like that?"

The old prospector glanced over his shoulder and saw that the Masked Rider was no longer coming after him. He hesitated a moment and then slowly walked closer to the two mounted men.

"Dyke Tyler tried to hold me up with his rifle," explained the Masked Rider. "I fired a shot over his head to convince him I didn't like the idea. Next thing I knew he had dropped his rifle and was running like a scared rabbit. I followed, aimin' to see what it was all about."

"That's yore story," said Ramsey, doubt in his tone. "Let's hear what Dyke has to say about it." He motioned the old prospector to come closer. "What happened, Dyke?" he asked.

"This fiend in the cunning livery of hell tried to kill me," muttered Tyler.

"You old fool!" snapped Neil Ramsey. "So that's it — yuh're drunk

again." The young rancher glanced at the Masked Rider. "Every time he gets too much to drink he starts using a lot of fancy lingo."

"So I've noticed," said the Masked Rider quietly as he dropped his gun back into the holster. He smiled at the old man. "Listen, Dyke, I won't hurt yuh."

"Guess that's right," decided Tyler. "Sorry I been actin' so loco. Guess I should figger the Masked Rider is a friend."

"Now yuh're talkin' sense, Dyke," said Ramsey quickly.

IN surprise the Masked Rider looked at the speaker. When he had encountered the young rancher at Tyler's castle out on the desert, Neil Ramsey had made it plain that he did not like the black-clad horseman. He wondered what had brought about the sudden change of heart.

"Yuh shore acted like yuh didn't want me around when I seen yuh yesterday," said the Masked Rider. "Yuh mind tellin' me why?"

"Reckon yuh'd be right proddy, too, if yuh found that folks was lying about yuh," said Ramsey bitterly. "Yesterday I just about hated everybody." He scowled. "It wasn't fair for Osborne to lie to her."

"Meaning young Pete Osborne?" asked the Masked Rider sympathetically. "The hombre that owns the general store in Gold Strike?"

"That's him," said the owner of the Box X spread. "The sneaking coyote—telling Norma stories about me that aren't true!" Ramsey looked anxiously at the Masked Rider. "You've got to help me prove that it is not true."

"Shore," agreed the Masked Rider. "But mebbe I could do better if yuh was to tell me what Osborne said about yuh."

"He said I was a spy for the Ghosts of Doom working under cover," said Ramsey tersely. "The sneaking liar! I'll show him."

"I'm going to get my hoss and my rifle," said the old prospector who apparently had been paying little attention to the conversation of the two men. "Be right back."

"A spy for the Ghosts of Doom," repeated the Masked Rider gravely. "That's a right dangerous thing to say about a man unless a feller could prove it."

"Osborne can't prove it," protested Ramsey. "It's all lies. He knows Norma likes me more than she does him, and so he's taking this way to try and get rid of me. Sheriff Bob Field is a friend to Pete Osborne and will believe anything he tells him. I'm a stranger in this part of the country. Only bought my spread from Dyke Tyler about six months ago and—"

Ramsey broke off abruptly as a rifle roared somewhere back in the brush. He clapped his hand to the left side of his gray flannel shirt, glared dazedly at the blood that stained his fingers and then slid limply out of the saddle to sprawl motionless on the ground beside his horse. The palomino snorted and stepped gingerly away from him.

The Masked Rider snatched out his right-hand gun and sent a bullet into the brush in the direction from which the rifle shot had come. At the same time he fearlessly urged Midnight forward. As the horse advanced toward the thicket the Masked Rider heard a crashing in the brush that steadily grew fainter as if someone was hastily retreating.

A few moments later Dyke Tyler appeared, mounted on a bay horse, his rifle in his saddle boot. At the same time another rider loomed into view to the left of the black-clad horseman.

As he drew closer, the Masked Rider saw it was the big Easterner, Leland Blunt. He rode like a man who had been bred in the saddle, not at all like a tenderfoot. The Masked Rider's eyes narrowed. There was also a rifle in the sheath beneath Blunt's leg.

"What happened?" shouted Blunt as he halted his horse. "Who was that big man on the pinto that I saw riding away?"

"Don't know," said the Masked Rider, he glanced at Tyler and then at Blunt. "But somebody around here drygulched young Neil Ramsey with a rifle!"

CHAPTER XI

Leland Blunt Fights

FOR a moment the Masked Rider watched the two men warily. Both Leland Blunt and Dyke Tyler had halted their mounts, and they sat in their saddles returning the gaze of the black-clad horseman. The big Easterner was still as immaculate as he had been when the Robin Hood outlaw had first seen him in front of the jail the previous evening.

The old prospector was mounted on a powerful bay horse, and now that he was in the saddle he looked far more dangerous than he had afoot and covering the Masked Rider with his rifle. In the estimation of the man in the black mask Dyke Tyler was a strange and incomprehensible character.

"I suggest that the first thing we do is see how badly Ramsey is hit," said Blunt suavely as he slid out of the saddle and went to the side of the motionless young ranch owner. "Perhaps he is still alive."

Neil Ramsey had landed face downward when he had fallen off his horse. Blunt rolled him over on his back and then placed his hand on the young man's chest over his heart.

"Still breathing," said Blunt. He withdrew his hand and looked at it with distaste as he saw that it was bloodstained. He drew a large silk handkerchief out of his riding trousers pocket and carefully wiped his fingers. "Bullet appears to have just grazed the summit of the left lung and narrowly missing the trachea."

"Good thing it didn't pierce the pulmonary artery," said the Masked Rider, gravely falling into the medical style of speech. "It looks like Ramsey has a good chance of living." And he knelt beside the young rancher and deftly proceeded to dress the wound with strips of Ramsey's own shirt.

Leland Blunt glanced at the Masked Rider, apparently surprised at the black-clad man's knowledge of lungs. Neil Ramsey suddenly moaned and opened his eyes. For an instant he gazed blankly up at the blue sky and then his eyes focused on the big Easterner. His expression grew wild, and he sat up weakly.

"Go away, I tell yuh," he muttered wildly. "You ain't foolin' me none. I know they sent yuh. Go away!"

"He acts like he don't like yuh, Blunt," said the Masked Rider. "Reckon he has a good reason?"

"If he has I don't know what it is." With a shrug Leland Blunt turned away from the wounded man. "I hardly know this chap. I've seen him around Gold Strike, of course, and heard that he has recently purchased a ranch somewhere in this vicinity."

Dyke Tyler reached for the canteen that was hanging on his saddle. He took a long drink and then another. The old prospector seemed to be enjoying himself so much that the Masked Rider strongly suspected that the canteen contained something stronger than water, and he suggested that Ramsey be given a drink.

"Alas, poor Yorick!" Tyler murmured in a deep clear voice. "I knew him, Horatio—a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy." He waved his hand and swung his horse around abruptly. "I'll be leavin' you hombres."

BEFORE the other men could object he dug spurs into his horse

and galloped away. Leland Blunt stood watching the departure of the little old gray-bearded man, a quizzical frown on his face.

"I'll ride to Les Dabney's spread, that's the nearest ranch," said Blunt as he swung into the saddle. "I'll get them to send out a buckboard to pick up Ramsey. He is hurt too critically to be safely moved any other way than by wagon."

"Just a minute before yuh go." The Masked Rider's hand was close to the butt of his gun, and his eyes were like blue ice. "I ain't got what yuh could call a trustin' nature, Blunt."

"Meaning just what?" demanded Blunt tersely.

"Somebody around here drygulched Ramsey," said the Masked Rider. "The same thing just might happen to me if you was to leave me here all alone with this wounded jasper."

"You mean you think *I* shot Ramsey?"

"Yuh could have done it, and that goes for Dyke Tyler, too."

"Why, you—" snapped Blunt in sudden anger, his hand high in the air above the gun on his right hip, a heavy Colt that looked as though it had seen far more service than the ornate holster which encased it.

To the south of the two men came the sudden rattle of gunfire, but neither the Masked Rider or the Easterner glanced in that direction. They knew that to do so would give the other man too much of a chance to draw if he felt so inclined.

The shots were followed by the thunder of galloping hoofs, and a group of riders loomed into view—eight men riding low in their saddles, bandanna handkerchiefs hiding the lower part of their faces.

"Trouble comes in bunches," said Blunt quietly. "Suppose we play out this hand some other time?" He removed his hand from the vicinity of his gun, and turned his horse so that his back was toward the Masked Rider as he rode toward the approaching men. "Come on!"

The Masked Rider found that he admired Leland Blunt's nerve. The Easterner was risking the chance of a bullet in his back from the black-clad horseman that he had just been about to face in a six-gun show-down by declaring a truce, and he obviously expected the Masked Rider to keep it.

The leader of the bandanna-masked band uttered a shout as he spied the Masked Rider and Blunt. He fired, and a bullet whistled close to the Masked Rider's head. Blunt's gun leaped into his hand in one of the quickest draws the black-clad horseman had ever seen. In fact, there were few men who could clear leather faster, and he was one of them. He vaulted into his saddle and rode after Blunt.

"Get them!" shouted Blunt as he fired, and the leader of the eight men slid out of the saddle with a bullet in his heart.

The Masked Rider's own guns were in his hands bucking and flaming as the bullets of the bandanna-disguised men whistled all about him. He felt them plucking at his fluttering black cloak and buzzing around him like a nest of angry hornets.

Another of the masked men went down. A horse stumbled, throwing its rider out of the saddle. Then in the distance a second group of riders loomed into view.

"More of them!" s h o u t e d the Masked Rider. "Keep shootin', Blunt."

LELAND BLUNT merely nodded as he continued to trigger his blazing gun. He appeared utterly fearless, and his dauntless courage in the face of gunfire was almost as great as that of the Robin Hood outlaw. A man in a bandanna mask rode close to him, lashing out at him with a heavy quirt. Blunt caught the end of the quirt and gave a quick jerk that pulled its wielder clear out of the saddle. A blow with the smoking six-shooter left

him in a sprawling heap on the ground.

There being only four of the men in the bandanna masks left, they suddenly wheeled their horses and galloped off to the north. They seemed to be fleeing from the second group of horsemen approaching.

"Hold yore fire, Blunt," shouted the Masked Rider as the second bunch of riders drew closer and he recognized the tall man who rode in the lead. "It's Sheriff Bob Field and a posse."

"You tell them what happened," called out Blunt as he wheeled his horse and rode away to the westward. "I'll see you later."

The Masked Rider halted Midnight and watched Blunt ride out of sight.

"That's shore one mysterious hombre," he muttered. "Wonder why he high-tailed it thataway?"

The sheriff and his men thundered up, bringing their horses to a sliding halt close to the black-clad man.

"The Masked Rider," exclaimed the young lawman. "Seen yuh fightin' them coyotes we was chasing, but who was the jasper with you? He got away before we could see him plain."

"That was Leland Blunt," said the Masked Rider, watching the sheriff closely.

"Oh, Blunt!" Field scowled. "Then why did he run away?"

"He didn't say," answered the Masked Rider. "How come yuh're out with a posse so early in the morning, Sheriff?"

He looked over the faces of the men riding with the sheriff and saw Muddy Waters and Sorrow Boswell were present, as were Pete Osborne and Reece Sutton. The rest appeared to be waddies and men from the town. Only Alex Page and Warren Hickey were missing of those who had been in the posse the previous day.

"Feller by the name of Morgan and

[*Turn page*]

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an Injun escaped from jail," said Sheriff Field. "They was taken away by some of the Ghosts of Doom, it must have been."

"That's right," the fat deputy said quickly. "Must have been at least ten of them sidewinders that sneaked into the sheriff's office and drawed down on me when I wasn't lookin'. I put up a big fight, but there was just too many of them for me. They tied me up, blindfolded and gagged me and took away the prisoners."

"I see," said the Masked Rider, controlling a smile as he heard Sorrow Boswell's version of what had occurred. "But who were these men with the bandanna masks? Where did yuh run across them, Sheriff?"

"We were out looking for Morgan, the Indian and the men with them," said the sheriff, "when we suddenly run across eight mounted men all gathered together talking. Soon as they seen us ridin' toward them, they all put on them bandanna handkerchiefs and tried to get away. Of course, we gave chase and followed them over thisaway."

THE Masked Rider realized the eight men must have been the same bunch that he had encountered just before dawn. Apparently they had hidden their hoods somewhere when the posse appeared and the Ghosts of Doom men had been forced to disguise themselves with bandanna handkerchiefs instead.

"Mebbe yuh better take a look at the faces of them dead jaspers," suggested the Masked Rider, glancing at the motionless bodies of the bandanna-masked men sprawled around on the ground. "Yuh might find why they was so anxious not to be recognized!"

As Sheriff Field turned to give orders to his men to this effect the black-clad horseman whirled Midnight, and the big black stallion galloped away.

"Hey, wait!" shouted the young lawman. "I wanna talk—"

The rest of his words were drowned in the thudding of Midnight's pounding hoofs as the black horse circled around a clump of trees that quickly hid him from view. The Masked Rider was heading for his hideout, anxious to get there as rapidly as possible. He felt that the sooner Wayne Morgan appeared at Les Dabney's ranch the better it would be.

With a posse hunting for him as Morgan, the Robin Hood outlaw figured that if he could convince the owner of the Bar D he was a lawman working under cover, Dabney might be able to make Field and the posse believe the same thing.

"Wonder if Blunt wasn't lyin' after all when he said he seen a big man riding away just after Neil Ramsey was shot," mused the Masked Rider as he reached the hideout and swung out of the saddle. "A big man. Huh, there's four hombres around here that could have been. One of them is Blunt himself, one is Les Dabney, and the third is that fat foreman of his—Hap Wilcox." Morgan frowned as he removed the cloak and mask. "And the fourth one that I know about would be Dyke Tyler's segundo, Tom Malory. That jigger tried to drygulch me. He swore he'd never do anything like that again, but he just might have changed his mind about that!"

CHAPTER XII

Who Is Mister Jones?

BECAUSE Wayne Morgan had learned a lot about the location of the various ranches in this part of the country while he had been riding to and from Gold Strike the previous day, he knew that the Bar D was to the southeast of the desert and that Les Dabney's spread was large. It was not until he found himself rid-

ing across a vast expanse of rangeland, however, and discovered cattle scattered around him on all sides bearing the Bar D brand that he realized how big this ranch really was in the ground it covered.

"This shore is right considerable of a spread," commented Morgan. "Reckon Dabney must be the big curly wolf around this part of the country all right."

Midnight was hidden back in the mountains and again the tall, dark-haired man was riding his roan. Gone was the black cloak and the mask, and the black sombrero had been replaced by the gray Stetson. His holstered guns were still tied to his levis-clad thighs. The keen blue eyes and the strong, tanned face indicated that this man would make a good friend or a dangerous foe, but there was nothing about him to suggest that he was other than a wandering waddy.

He topped a rise and drew rein on the crest of the hill. Below him was a cattleman's dream. Nestling in a grove of green trees were ranch buildings, all of them spacious, and all of them freshly painted and clean-looking. There was a big main building that was obviously the ranchhouse, to the left of which was a long rambling structure that must be the bunkhouse. Beyond this a windmill loomed high in the sky.

A big bunch of horses moved about languidly in a big cavvy corral. Fat steers dotted the landscape, and to the right of the ranchhouse was a huge barn. Beside this were haystacks, and a harness shed.

"Some outfit," said Morgan as he rode on down the hill. "Must take a heap of cowhands to keep a place like this going."

His eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he passed close to a big longhorn steer with a white face. He saw mounted men scattered all around in the distance. Some of them were driving strays out of a rugged stretch of country farther to the southeast. Others were roping and saddling fresh horses in the corral. Men with pitchforks were unloading hay from a big hay wagon, starting another stack close to the others that had been piled high.

Morgan smiled as he rode closer. To him there was something natural and heart-warming about a ranch outfit at work like this. Some of the men spotted him as he approached, but they gave him no more than a casual glance. It was evident that the Bar D crew had seen many strangers drift in and perhaps ride away again.

He reached the six men who were working with the hay. He found that Hap Wilcox, the stout foreman, was one of them. Wilcox leaned on his pitchfork and looked curiously at the black-haired man on the roan. Morgan knew that it was only as the Masked Rider that the foreman had ever seen him, so he did not have the faintest idea who this stranger might be.

"MORNIN'," said Morgan. "The boss around?"

"Reckon so," Wilcox nodded. "Who's asking?"

"Name is Morgan. You the foreman of this outfit?"

"Good guess," Wilcox said, straightening up. He suddenly moaned, and a pained expression crossed his moon-like face. "Ouch! My backache is near killin' me." He frowned at Morgan. "Yuh lookin' for Les Dabney?"

"Shore am," said Morgan, "if he's the boss."

"He is, and yuh'll find him up at the house."

The rest of the waddies continued working without paying any attention to Morgan and the foreman. Hap Wilcox moaned and lifted his pitchfork.

"Thanks," Morgan called over his shoulder as he headed the roan toward the big ranchhouse. "Mebbe yuh better get some horse liniment for yore back."

"Don't do no good," called Wilcox.

"I tried it once. Hey, I forgot to tell yuh the boss ain't hirin' nobody now."

"That's good," said Morgan. "I forgot to tell you I ain't lookin' for a job."

Morgan found a hitching rail close to the ranchhouse porch. He tied the roan and walked up the steps. Les Dabney appeared in the open doorway of the ranchhouse. The big cattleman stood there looking at Morgan.

"Well?" he said finally. "Who are you?"

"Wayne Morgan."

"Oh!" There was a look of surprise on Dabney's big, handsome face. "I heard about you. Thought Sheriff Field put you and an Indian in jail last night."

"He did," said Morgan. "But that was a mistake. I'm a heap more use to all you folks around here just sort of roaming free and easy like."

"Prove it," said Les Dabney flatly.

"The Southwestern Railroad figgers it is gonna be hard on their shippin' if trail herds keep on failin' to get across the desert safely." Morgan leaned against a post of the porch, drew out his papers and tobacco and rolled himself a quirly. "They might want to know just who is runnin' the Ghosts of Doom outfit."

"So that's it." Dabney walked over and dropped into a chair. "Undercover man for the railroad, eh?"

"I ain't said so." Morgan lighted a match with the flick of a thumbnail and held the tiny glow to his cigarette. "A man's a fool to talk too much."

"He shore is," said Dabney as he produced a pipe and tobacco and filled it slowly. "Why did yuh come to me?"

"Yuh got the biggest spread around here. Yuh should be more interested in shipping yore stock safely than anyone. I let the sheriff arrest me and put me in jail last night without telling him nothing."

"Why not?" asked Les Dabney as he lighted his pipe.

"Wanted to be shore who I could trust first. Figgered mebbe I'd talk to Field in the mornin'."

"And yuh broke out of jail instead during the night?"

"No, I didn't have anything to do with that," said Morgan. "They come and got me."

"Come and got yuh?" Dabney said. "Yuh mean that somebody helped you and the Indian escape from jail? Who?"

"Five of them hooded jaspers," Morgan nodded. "Tied up the fat deputy and got the jail keys. Had hosses waiting and took us away with them."

DABNEY'S jaw dropped in amazement.

"Yuh mean some of the Ghosts of Doom actually helped yuh to break out of jail?" he exclaimed. "But why?"

"I kind of got the idea they didn't like us." Morgan glanced over his shoulder and saw that Hap Wilcox had strolled casually up to the porch steps and was standing there listening. "Yuh better send yore watchdog back to work."

"Why, blast yuh for sass!" growled the discomfited foreman, and his right hand streaked for one of the two guns that he was wearing.

He paused, the weapon half-drawn as he found himself covered by a gun in Morgan's right hand while the barrel of the Colt in the dark-haired stranger's left hand was aimed at Dabney.

"Why me?" asked the owner of the Bar D calmly without moving from his chair. He frowned at Wilcox. "That was a fool play, Hap. What do yuh want?"

"My back hurts," growled the stout man. "I come to ask yuh if I couldn't take the rest of the day off." He glared at Morgan. "And I ain't no watchdog."

"Shore would like to see you and Sorrow Boswell together," said Morgan quietly as he dropped his guns back into their holsters. "Bet yuh'd

look like a couple of barrels of lard."

Dabney laughed, but Wilcox gave Morgan a wicked glance and then turned away.

"All right, Hap," called Dabney. "Yuh can have the rest of the day off. Yuh better go where there is a lot of water and cool off." The big ranch owner looked back at Morgan as the foreman disappeared around the side of the house. "What happened to these hooded men who took yuh away from the jail, Morgan?" He took up the conversation as though there had been no interruption.

"One of them was right careless and let me get close enough to grab his gun out of the holster." Morgan's tone was hard. "The Indian run away then—and when the shooting started all five of them jaspers died."

"I don't believe it," said Dabney. "Five to one is too big odds. Why, yuh talk like the Masked Rider!"

For an instant Morgan stood glaring at the big ranch owner. Did Dabney know that this man he faced was actually the Masked Rider without his disguise? Morgan was tense and anxious, for it was only by concealing his identity that he had made the Robin Hood outlaw such a power among the foes he faced.

"Yuh just talk like him," said Dabney with a dry smile. "Yuh shore ain't the Masked Rider."

"Reckon not." Morgan permitted a note of amusement to creep into his tone as he relaxed. "He gets around and sees a heap of the country from all I've heard, but I don't know of him working for a railroad."

"I know," Dabney nodded as he leaned back in his chair. "But what do yuh want me to do, Morgan?"

"Mebbe yuh might be able to convince Sheriff Field that I'm more useful to the world at large if I was allowed to roam around loose. I ain't gonna be a bit of good to you and the rest of the ranchers or to the railroad either if I have to go back to jail."

"Suppose the sheriff refuses to listen to me?"

"I figger that Field will listen," said Morgan. "I reckon him and the posse will be headin' back to town with Ramsey, seeing as he is wounded right bad—"

"Is Neil Ramsey wounded?" interrupted Dabney in surprise. "How did that happen?"

IT dawned on Morgan that he had said too much. It had been as the Masked Rider that he had seen Ramsey shot by the drygulcher and had encountered the sheriff and the posse. If Dabney asked questions, Sheriff Field and the rest of the men with him would be sure to wonder how Wayne Morgan knew so much regarding what had happened when none of them had seen the tall stranger anywhere in the vicinity.

Morgan was thinking fast. He decided there was one way he could explain how he knew about Ramsey being wounded without putting himself under his suspicion.

"It was that Eastern jasper who told me about it," he said. "I ran across Leland Blunt an hour ago. He said Ramsey had been shot by a drygulcher."

"That's right interestin'," said Dabney, looking at something behind Morgan. "Here comes Blunt and Warren Hickey now. Reckon they'll tell us all about it."

Morgan glanced over his shoulder and saw that the two men in question were riding toward the ranchhouse. He sensed trouble, for the gambler had been with the posse when Field had arrested him, and had called him a coward and a liar. He felt that he could hardly consider Warren Hickey a friend. As for the big Easterner, Leland Blunt did not even know Wayne Morgan. It had been the Masked Rider that he had aided in fighting the men in the bandanna masks. This looked like an impassé.

Blunt and Hickey halted their mounts at the hitching rail, swung out of their saddles and fastened their reins to the long pole. They came up the porch steps, their faces expressionless as they saw Dabney and Morgan.

"Mornin', Les," greeted Warren Hickey. "The sheriff will be right grateful to yuh for capturin' this escaped prisoner."

"Seems to me that Field and the rest of yuh acted kind of hasty-like when yuh put Morgan in jail last night," said Dabney quietly.

"Yuh ain't really defendin' this yellow coyote?" demanded Hickey in surprise.

"You Westerners are so aggressive," sighed Blunt as he dropped into a chair. "Sounds to me like you have been insulted, Morgan, and that calls for physical combat, I believe."

"Seems so." Morgan's blue eyes were like ice as he gazed at the big gambler. "I'd a heap rather make it fists than guns, Mr. Hickey, but you choose, and I'll be glad to oblige."

"Reckon fists will do," Hickey said and removed his long black coat. He folded it neatly over the back of a porch chair. "This grub-line rider strikes me as a big bluff, Dabney. This won't take long."

Morgán silently unbuckled his crossed gun-belts and handed them to Blunt. Hickey also removed his gun-belt. The two men stepped down off the porch steps. While the gambler was a little heavier, they were both over six feet tall, and seemed well matched.

"I'll finish this quick!" snapped Hickey as he suddenly lunged forward and smashed a fist at Morgan's face. "Let's go!"

MORGAN ducked the blow and lashed out with a right and a left that had plenty of power behind them. Hickey reeled back, and before he could regain his balance Morgan landed an uppercut against the gambler's jaw that lifted Hickey's feet off the ground and sent him sprawling to the grass.

"Yuh said yuh wanted it to be quick," he said softly as he waited for the other man to get to his feet.

"Hardly the attitude of a yellow coyote," commented Leland Blunt from his vantage point on the porch beside Dabney. "From here it looks to me like you made an error in judgment of character, Hickey."

"It does to me, too," said Warren Hickey surprisingly, as he got to his feet. To Morgan's amazement the gambler held out his hand. "I'm apologizing, Morgan. A man who can punch like that just can't be a coward —and I'm apologizing."

"There ain't no hard feelings on my part," said Morgan as he shook hands firmly. "And I did go for help yesterday when I left the stage."

"I'm believing that now," said Hickey. His hard eyes were fixed on Morgan's face, eyes that had learned to judge character as swiftly as he shuffled a deck of cards. "Just who are yuh, anyway?"

There was a tight little silence as the three men waited for Morgan to answer. He deliberately held the silence for a moment, his eyes fixed on the smoke rising from the chimney of a blacksmith's shanty some distance beyond the ranchhouse. The blacksmith's hammer clanked musically against the anvil; the white smoke was clear against the deep blue sky.

"Who are yuh, Morgan?" repeated Hickey.

"Well," said Morgan quietly, watching the faces of the three big men who stood looking at him, "yuh might say I'm a jasper who is beginning to get some interestin' ideas about a hombre called Mister Jones!"

If he had expected a reaction to this sudden statement he was disappointed. Nobody moved. Then the big Easterner lazily responded.

"A statement which might be ex-

tremely dangerous if voiced in the presence of the wrong party," said Leland Blunt languidly. "Either you are an exceptionally brave man or a damn fool, Morgan." He stretched with all the grace of a jungle cat. "And I suspect it is a little of both!"

CHAPTER XIII

Kidnapers

CAREFULLY Les Dabney knocked the ashes out of his pipe by tapping the briar against the porch railing. Blunt handed Morgan back his gunbelts, and he buckled them on, conscious of all three men watching as he adjusted the holsters and fastened the rawhide thongs that held them in place low on his levis-clad legs.

"Yuh shore can hit, Morgan," said Warren Hickey as he put on his long black coat and adjusted his string tie. "My face feels like I been kicked by a mule."

"Mebbe yuh were — kinda," remarked the owner of the Bar D.

"Meanin' yuh consider me a jackass." Morgan smiled wryly at Dabney. "Yuh mind me askin' why?"

"Blunt just told yuh a minute ago," said Dabney. "Why, if one of us happened to be the leader of the Ghosts of Doom yore life wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel from now on."

"That's where you are wrong, Dabney," stated Leland Blunt. "For Morgan to meet with an unseemly death now would be very foolish if this Mr. Jones was a man of brains. When you stop to reason it out—quite hypothetically, of course—all three of us couldn't be working with those hooded killers under cover."

"Meaning just what, Blunt?" Warren Hickey demanded, his voice cold and hard.

"If one of us was to have Morgan killed, it would look mighty suspicious to the other two men," said Blunt.

"Wait a minute, gents," said Morgan with a smile. "If yuh ain't got any objections, I'd just as leave take care of my own funeral arrangements —if any!"

"Which seems to settle that." Les Dabney smiled. "But what do you two want, Hickey?" He looked at the gambler and the big Easterner. "I don't reckon yuh rode all the way out here from town just because yuh suddenly got a hankerin' for my society."

"No, it ain't exactly that," admitted Warren Hickey. "We got a little matter we'd like to discuss with yuh." He glanced at Morgan. "Private-like."

"Being a feller that can take a hint as wide as a barn door, I'll be amblin'," Morgan said with a grin as he started down the porch steps. "I'm goin' to see a hoss about a drink of water."

"Stick around the spread, Morgan," called Dabney. "I'd like to have a talk with yuh later. Mebbe we can find a way of convincin' the sheriff he made a mistake in arrestin' yuh in the first place."

"I'll back yuh up on that one, Dabney," said the gambler heartily.

Morgan merely nodded as he strolled over to the hitching rail. He unfastened the roan's reins and swung into the saddle. He walked the horse down toward the bunkhouse. As he rode he saw Hap Wilcox step out of the blacksmith shop. The fat foreman glared at Morgan as the latter rode by, but neither man said anything.

When he reached a water trough near the cavvy corral Morgan halted the roan and let the horse drink. There was a pump nearby, and he swung out of the saddle and got himself a drink also to rinse the dust of combat out of his mouth.

His attitude was casual and apparently indifferent to his surroundings, but he was very much alert and missing nothing that went on around him.

The activities of the big Bar D ranch interested him greatly.

"Mebbe Blunt was right and I did kind of speak out of turn," he said thoughtfully to himself. "Sayin' I was gettin' ideas about this Mister Jones was just askin' that sidewinder to drygulch me."

YET the more he thought it over the more satisfied he became regarding what he had said and done. One of the three men to whom he had just talked could possibly be the leader of the Ghosts of Doom masking his nefarious deeds under a cloak of respectability. And then again it might not be any of them.

In the former event, Wayne Morgan had deliberately made himself the human bait with which he hoped to draw the leader of the hooded men out into the open. In this respect Leland Blunt's words, when he had said it would create suspicion if anything happened to Morgan, were a hindrance rather than a help. The warning of the big man from the East might deter "Mr. Jones" from acting impulsively.

"Shore is a lot of smart hombres around this neck of the woods," muttered Morgan disgustedly. "All acting free and easy-like and playin' their hand so close there ain't a chance of gettin' a peep at the cards any of them are holding."

He was gazing northward toward the desert as he spoke, and his eyes centered on a puff of white smoke that rose high in the blue sky before it finally faded from view. It was followed by another cloud of smoke, and then a third puff arose.

"So that's it," said Morgan softly. "I wondered how it was done."

He turned and glanced toward the ranchhouse, and was just in time to see Blunt and Hickey swing into their saddles and ride away. He wondered what the mission had been that had brought the two men out to the Bar D. Doubtlessly Dabney had asked Blunt about the shooting of Neil Ramsey, and Morgan wondered what the Easterner had said regarding that.

Morgan saw Dabney standing on the porch steps motioning him to come back, so he swung into the saddle and returned to the hitching rail near the porch.

"Yuh might just as well have stuck around, Morgan," said Dabney as Morgan dismounted and climbed to the porch. "No point in keeping what those two had on their minds a secret from you, specially as yuh are working for the railroad under cover."

"Yuh tell them that?" demanded Morgan.

"No." Dabney smiled and shook his head. "Figgered yuh would tell them if yuh wanted 'em to know. Anyway, they aim to form a sort of vigilante committee to wipe out this Ghosts of Doom outfit. I'm all for it, of course. Damn near lost a trail herd yesterday, and I been losing small bunches of cattle steadily like everyone else around here."

"Sounds like a good idea," said Morgan. "Listen, Dabney, there's some things been puzzling me about this whole setup and mebbe you just might know the answers."

"Mebbe," agreed the rancher. "I been living in this part of the country for the last ten years. What's on yore mind, Morgan?"

"First, have yuh any ideas about these hooded jaspers? There seems to be a lot of them, and they can't just hide out on the desert all of the time. Are there any strangers that yuh have seen around? Men yuh might have seen in town or over in Brushville?"

"Shore, there's plenty of them," said Dabney. "Since this trouble started every spread around here has been hiring extra men, and most of them look like gunslicks to me. I've got some right salty jiggers in my own outfit. I ain't taking any chances though. I have my regular waddies watching those other hombres all of

the time. I don't aim to have any of the men from this spread working with the Ghosts of Doom under cover—sneaking out and joining up with them in their raids."

"Yuh figger these new men with the other outfits might be doing just that?" asked Morgan.

LES DABNEY nodded. "Listen, Morgan, I'm going to tell yuh somethin' that no one else around here knows. The Masked Rider is working with us!"

"The Masked Rider!" exclaimed Morgan, his tone incredulous. "Yuh know who he is then?"

"No, I don't," admitted Dabney. "But I've asked him to try and find out just where them hooded jaspers hide when they ain't raiding out on the desert."

"Yuh ever figger that Dyke Tyler's castle could be the hideout?" inquired Morgan.

"Of course, I have," said Dabney. "Suspected it all along, but there ain't nobody will agree with me. Everyone around here has known Dyke for a long time, and they all are shore he's as honest as the day is long. If yuh ask me, he's been acting right strange lately. Drinking too much for one thing, and not associating with old friends any more than he can help."

"If yuh suspect the castle is the hideout, why ain't you and the rest of the ranchers doing something about it?" asked Morgan.

"'Cause they won't listen to me," snorted Dabney, frowning. "They all say there ain't no sense for a man that's as rich as Dyke Tyler turning bandit and leading a bunch like them hooded jaspers. Didn't the sheriff take a posse to the castle and not find anything wrong?"

"Reckon he did," said Morgan cautiously. "I heard so, anyway. But why don't yuh do something about it yoreself if the other ranchers don't side with yuh?"

"I am," Dabney said. "Neil Ramsey is a friend of mine. It was me that got him to buy that spread from Tyler. That gives Ramsey a chance to go see the old prospector any old time and to keep watch on the castle while he's doin' it. Just last night Neil discovered something suspicious."

"What was that?"

"There ain't no more gold in that claim the old man has under the castle," said the owner of the Bar D.

Morgan pretended to be surprised, but he actually was not in the least. When he had explored the workings of the mine below the castle the previous evening he had noticed that there was little sign of activity there. The dump cars on the narrow track had been covered with dust and looked as though they had not been used for some time.

[*Turn page*]

If Dyke Tyler's mine was no longer producing, that might explain a lot of things—why the old man permitted the hooded men to make his castle their hideout, and perhaps even that he was the leader of the Ghosts of Doom.

"Did Ramsey let Tyler know he had found out about the mine?" asked Morgan.

"Believe he did," said Dabney.

"Which may be why Ramsey was drygulched this mornin'," said Morgan thoughtfully. "Dyke Tyler could have done that. Did Blunt say anything to you about it?"

A look of annoyance crossed Les Dabney's strong face and he frowned.

"I plumb forgot to ask him anything about it," he said. "Got so interested in hearing about this vigilante business that I didn't think about anything else."

"It don't matter," said Morgan.

HIS eyes narrowed as he saw a shadow at the side of the house. It was the shadow of a big man who was evidently lurking around the corner of the porch listening to the conversation of the two men.

"I'll talk to the sheriff as soon as I get a chance," promised Dabney. "Reckon I can convince him it is best to let yuh go now that yuh are free. What happened to the Indian?"

"He lit out soon as he found I was keeping them hooded jaspers too busy to bother with him," Morgan smiled. "Don't reckon that Yaqui will be seen around this part of the country no more."

Abruptly his hand flashed down to his holstered guns, and the two heavy Colts leaped into his hands in a lightning draw.

"You can come out now," he called to the man lurking at the side of the house. "Move fast, or I'll put a bullet in yuh!"

He expected the fat foreman to loom into view, but much to his amazement it was a blond young man who appeared, a rather shame-faced expression on his good-looking countenance.

"Pete Osborne!" exclaimed Les Dabney angrily, his hand on the butt of his gun. "What's the idea of spying on me this way?"

"Sorry, Dabney," said the young owner of the general store. "I came up to the house by the back way. Just as I reached the corner I heard voices, so I stopped to make shore I wasn't buttin' into a private conversation."

"Yuh should be right certain of it by now," said Morgan dryly as he thrust his guns back into leather. "Yuh been standin' there for some time. I seen yore shadow."

"All right, I was listening then," said Osborne bluntly. "After I heard how close to death Norma Sutton and her father come yesterday when the stage was attacked I'll do anything to clean out those damn Ghosts of Doom. Anything, I tell yuh! I don't care if it makes me look like a sneak or not. Somebody around here is the leader of that outfit and I'm going to find out who it is!"

"Calm down, kid," said Les Dabney. "Yuh're among friends. Me and Morgan feel the same way about it that you do."

"Oh, yuh do, do yuh!" snapped Osborne. "Seems mighty strange that after Sheriff Field arrested this feller Morgan on suspicion last night somebody helps him to break out of jail and I find him here with you now, Dabney. And I heard yuh tellin' Morgan yuh could convince the sheriff he oughta let him go free."

"And why do yuh think I said that?" asked Dabney softly, but his eyes were hard.

"There's only one reason," said Osborne. "That must be because Bob Field is afraid of yuh and has to do what yuh say."

"Why should the sheriff be afraid of me?" demanded the owner of the Bar D.

"Because you know that Field is working with the Ghosts of Doom!" snapped Pete Osborne.

"Yuh're crazy!" exclaimed Dabney, and Morgan looked at the young store owner in amazement. "Sheriff Field is an honest, hard-working lawman, and yuh know it."

MORGAN remembered the way Neil Ramsey had talked just before he had been shot by the dry-gulcher—his bitter attitude toward Pete Osborne because he said that the young store-keeper had been lying to Norma Sutton about him. That Osborne had accused him of working with the Ghosts of Doom under cover.

Was Osborne lying again now in trying to implicate Sheriff Field, or did this young belligerent actually believe what he was saying? It was a question that Wayne Morgan could not answer. The deeper he got into the complications created by the Ghosts of Doom in this desert country the more complex the whole situation became.

It was almost with a sense of relief that he saw a rider galloping toward the ranch on a fleet little sorrel horse. Blond hair fluttered in the bright sunlight, and a slender figure dressed in a flannel shirt, boots and riding trousers was outlined against the green of the trees behind her as Norma Sutton approached the ranch.

"Quick, get your horses, all of you!" she called out when she was close enough for the three men to hear her voice. "The Ghosts have raided Alex Page's spread and kidnaped his little boy!"

Les Dabney cursed, and a startled expression appeared on Pete Osborne's face.

"Yuh shore of that, Norma?" demanded Osborne.

"Of course, I'm sure," the girl said impatiently as she reined her horse close to the three men. "I've just come from there. Aren't you going to do anything about it? Alex has gone looking for the raiders. All of his men were out working with a herd, and he didn't even wait to tell them when he found Sonny was missing."

"All right," said Les Dabney. "Pete, take Norma back to the Box S to be shore she is safe—"

"Safe with him!" exclaimed Norma, glaring at Osborne. "A man who would lie about his friends because he thinks it makes him look like a hero! I won't go anywhere with him."

"I'd be delighted to see that yuh get home safely, Miss Sutton," said Morgan quietly.

"Reckon that's best, Morgan," said Dabney with a quick glance at the red-faced Pete Osborne. "I'll get my men and we'll ride out to help Alex Page. Yuh better come along with me, Pete."

"But, Norma," protested Osborne, "I didn't lie to yuh. It is true that—"

"Please," said the blond-haired girl coolly. "Let's not discuss it now, Mr. Osborne."

She swung her horse around and rode away. Morgan ran to the roan, leaped into the saddle and followed the girl. His expression was thoughtful as he drew alongside.

"Looks to me like young Osborne has shore talked himself into a heap of trouble," he said thoughtfully to himself.

CHAPTER XIV

A Father's Madness

GALLOPING along, Wayne Morgan and Norma Sutton soon reached the Box S ranch. During the ride the girl explained how she had learned what had happened at Alex Page's spread. It was her custom to ride over and visit little Sonny Page at frequent intervals. From what Norma said Morgan gathered

that the six-year-old boy adored her.

He learned that Page had a housekeeper, an elderly woman who also took care of the boy. Early this morning Sonny had gone for a ride on his pony, accompanied by one of Page's waddies. Just as Norma reached the ranch the waddy had returned, badly wounded and dying. He just managed to report an attack by the Ghosts of Doom in which the boy had been kidnaped by the hooded men.

As soon as Reece Sutton learned what had happened from his daughter the old rancher gathered up his men and started out across the desert in search of the hooded band. Morgan went with them, riding with the irate old rancher in the lead of a band of twenty grim-faced, heavily armed men.

"Yuh're shore a strange hombre, Morgan," said the gray-haired man. "The sheriff has a posse out looking for yuh. I was riding with them this morning until I got tired of it. We run across Neil Ramsey, who'd been badly wounded by a drygulcher. Had some of my men with the posse ride back to the ranch and get a buckboard. They brought Ramsey to the Box S and he's in the house there now."

"I see," said Morgan. "How come the drygulcher didn't finish the job on Ramsey, if he was wounded so bad he couldn't fight back."

"Guess the Masked Rider and Leland Blunt kinda stopped that," said Sutton. "But as I was sayin', yuh're a strange hombre, Morgan. Yuh get out of jail, and yuh must figger the sheriff has a posse out after yuh, but yuh don't pay no attention to that. Yuh ride from the Bar D to my spread just to be shore my daughter gets home safely."

"Why not?" Morgan smiled. "Field had no right arresting me in the first place. I had done nothing that gave him a reason for figgerin' I'd broken the law."

"That's right," Reece Sutton agreed with a nod. "And I'm going to tell that young whippersnapper of a sheriff just what I think of him the next time I see him. He—"

They had ridden to the top of a rise. The rancher broke off at the sight that met their eyes. Down in a gully one man was fighting off six mounted men in white hoods.

"It's Alex Page!" shouted Sutton. "Come on!"

The old rancher's gun was in his hand, as were Morgan's Colts, and the two men galloped down the hill with the Box S men spreading out behind them. Morgan's guns started roaring their song of death as he came within six-gun range of the Ghosts of Doom. One of the hooded men slid out of the saddle as a bullet caught him in the heart. A horse screamed and went down, threshing around on the hard ground and pinning its rider beneath it.

"Let them have it, boys!" shouted Sutton. "Blast the dirty coyotes down!" He fired and gave a yell of delight as he saw his bullet knock one of the hooded men out of the saddle.

THE guns of all twenty of Sutton's riders were smoking and roaring as they blasted away at their foes. Morgan decided that if any of the Box S outfit had been working with the Ghosts of Doom they were certainly ruthless in mowing down their foes now.

But it was Morgan's own guns that dominated the whole scene. He seemed to be everywhere. He was the one who first saw a second group of white-hooded riders coming to the aid of their hard-pressed comrades.

"Come on!" he shouted. "Here's more of them sidewinders!"

A roar of anger came from the throats of the Box S waddies. Some of them were frantically reloading their hot, smoking guns, others were still chasing the surviving pair of the hooded band that had attacked Page.

Page, his own horse shot from under him, caught the reins of a riderless horse as it ran close to him, brought the animal to a stop by a remarkable feat of strength and swung into the saddle. He was like a man demented.

"Where's my boy?" he shouted, blasting his gun into the covered face of one of the raiders. "Where is he, yuh coyotes?"

Alex Page was berserk. He sent a bullet into one of his foes with every shot of his gun, howling his question that he gave them no chance to answer. Then when he found his Colt empty he flung the weapon into the face of the nearest man.

At least twenty more Ghosts of Doom had joined the fray, and men and horses were milling around in such a mad scramble that it was difficult to keep from shooting a friend instead of a foe. Morgan's hot guns bucked and roared, and the little basin at the edge of the desert was filled with the acrid smell of burning powder, the roaring of guns and the shouting and cursing of angry, fighting men. The fight went on grimly, five of the Box S waddies dying in the clash. Blood flowed freely from a spot where a bullet had cut into Morgan's left forearm.

"We've got them licked, men!" shouted Reece Sutton. "Keep it up! Keep fighting!"

Morgan realized that the old man was shouting to keep up the courage of his outfit. He saw that the tide was gradually turning against them. They were outnumbered by the Ghosts of Doom now, and it looked like it might be a losing fight for the Box S crew.

A hooded man rode close as Morgan was hastily reloading his guns. He snapped the last shell into the gun in his right hand and then reached out with his left to grab the hood of the man beside him. The cloth came off with a ripping sound, and Morgan saw the gray-bearded face of Dyke Tyler glaring at him.

"Dyke Tyler!" he shouted. "So you are the leader of the Ghosts of Doom, after all!"

The bearded man's gun blazed in response, and Morgan felt like a house had fallen on his head. He grew limp as everything went black before his eyes. His feet came free of the stirrups and he slid out of the saddle.

"Here they come!" shouted Sutton, who had not even seen what had happened to Morgan. "It's the sheriff and the posse. We're saved, men. Keep fighting."

The bearded Dyke Tyler glanced in the direction that Reece Sutton pointed. When he saw a band of horsemen approaching, he ducked low in his saddle and dug spurs into his horse. He made no attempt to see if any of his men were following or to even call to them as he beat a hasty retreat from the scene.

IN that inferno of roaring guns no one paid any special attention to him. With thundering hoofs the sheriff and his men came riding up. In a moment their guns were blazing along with those of the men from the Cross S. Hooded men died like flies until there was none of them left alive.

A strange hush lingered over everything when the victors realized that the battle was over. A waddy walked over to a badly wounded horse that was threshing about on the ground and dispassionately shot the animal through the head to put it out of its misery.

Wayne Morgan opened his eyes to find himself peering at the world through a red haze. He wiped a hand across his forehead as he sat up and found his fingers were crimson with blood. Vague shapes moved toward him, hands that were gentle but strong helped him to his feet.

"Just creased him," he heard Reece Sutton say. "Bleeding quite a bit though."

A wet rag was cool against his fore-

head as someone washed the blood away and tied a bandage in place. His head throbbed, but the red haze was gone and he could see clearly again. He saw Sheriff Bob Field regarding him, a frown on his lean young face.

"Morgan fighting with the Ghosts of Doom?" asked Field, looking at the owner of the Box S.

"No, with us!" growled Sutton. "You gonna be an idiot all yore life, Field? Arrestin' Morgan last night was a fool play in the first place."

"Shore it was," said Sorrow Boswell who was standing behind the sheriff, carefully reloading his gun. "Didn't I hear them jaspers that took Morgan out of jail say they'd fix him and the Indian for spying on them?"

"Just what I thought," said Muddy Waters.

"What *you* thought!" exclaimed the stout deputy. "As if yuh even could think!"

"You fools!" cried Alex Page as he gazed wildly around him at the motionless forms of the dead Ghosts of Doom. "Not a one of them left alive. How are we gonna find out what they done with my boy? Where did they take Sonny—where?"

Page was trembling, and he had aged incredibly in the past few hours. No longer was the rancher the placid, easy-going man he had been. His whole world was in his son, and now the boy was missing — kidnaped by the ruthless, hooded killers.

"I'll bring him back to yuh, Page," Morgan promised soothingly. He stood there, a rough bandage around his head, blood streaking one side of his face, and yet there was so much power in his voice and attitude that he dominated all of these men as he spoke. "I'll find the boy for yuh."

"Where, Morgan?" Page's face was suddenly alight with eagerness. He reached out and caught Morgan by the shoulder, his fingers digging into the flesh. "Do yuh know where?"

"Not yet," said Morgan. "But I've got an idea. To carry it out I must go look for the boy alone."

"So that will give yuh a chance to get away, eh?" said Sheriff Field. "To get out of this part of the country?"

PAGE turned slowly so that he faced the young lawman. Then suddenly the big rancher's heavy fist lashed out. It landed squarely on Field's chin and knocked the young lawman to the ground.

"He was going to stop him," muttered Alex Page to everybody in general. "Trying to stop Morgan when he said he knew how to find my boy. I couldn't let him do that—not even if he is the sheriff. I just couldn't! Morgan might be able to find Sonny." He whirled so that he again faced the tall, dark-haired man. "Yuh'll go? Yuh'll find him for me?"

"I'll go now." Morgan saw that one of the men had caught his roan and was holding the horse. He took the reins out of the man's hands and climbed weakly into the saddle. "I'll find him, Alex Page. Last night riding with the posse yuh were my friend. When the rest turned against me yuh were still my friend. I am yore friend now."

The others stood listening silently. Sorrow Boswell moved uncertainly toward the sheriff who was still sprawled out on the ground and then hesitated and shrugged his shoulders as he saw Reece Sutton place his hand on the butt of his gun.

"He helped us fight just now, too," said Sutton, his voice breaking through the silence. "Let him go, men."

"Can't yuh even give us a hint of where yuh're going?" begged Page as he went close to Morgan's horse.

"Somewhere out there!" Morgan motioned toward the desert stretching on into the distance. "But I'll find him, Alex."

The men watched silently as he rode away, heading into the purple haze.

They saw the roan appear to grow smaller and smaller as the distance between them and the departing rider lengthened.

The sheriff scrambled to his feet. He glared at Alex Page and then went wordlessly to his horse and swung into the saddle.

"Where yuh going, Field?" Page's voice was hoarse and unnatural, thick with menace.

"After him," snapped the sheriff. "He's an escaped prisoner."

"Yuh fool, yuh pig-headed young fool!" Page's gun was in his hand, the muzzle aimed at Sheriff Field. "Follow him and I'll kill yuh shore as yuh're alive!"

Field turned in his saddle and stared at the rancher. He saw that Alex Page meant just what he had said. It was in the look on his face, the gleam in his eyes.

The young sheriff shrugged his shoulders then and slid out of the saddle.

"All right," he said. "If that's the way yuh all want it. Let's see if we recognize any of these hooded jaspers."

They moved then, all of them glad to be busy. Only Page and Sutton remained there, with their eyes fixed on the horseman as he vanished into the shimmering haze of the desert, far ahead.

"Suppose they kill him before he can save the boy?" There was a pleading note in Alex Page's voice. He was like a child anxious to be assured that he was safe in the dark. "What then, Reece?"

"They won't kill him," said the old rancher. "He'll bring yore boy back to yuh, Alex. Bring him back to yuh safe and sound. Yuh've got to believe that."

"Yes," said Alex Page, his mind and his heart filled with the image of a laughing little curly-haired six-year-old. "I've got to believe that! I've just got to!"

CHAPTER XV

In Crow's-nest Castle

NIGHT brooded over Crow's-nest Castle. The huge place loomed eerily in the starlight. Watch towers loomed high against the deep blue sky, and everywhere there were deep black shadows. Water lapped against the stone walls that formed the sides of the moat, water that was fifteen feet deep in the man-made canal that guarded the castle from the desert surrounding it.

To the south a light gleamed as someone swung a lantern back and forth. From somewhere in the darkness that hid the castle entrance a gruff voice called out an order. There was the creaking of a windlass and the rattling of chains as the drawbridge across the moat was slowly lowered. In the shadows it looked as though the mouth of a huge whale had opened.

"They're comin' now, Hawk," the Masked Rider said, touching the Yaqui's arm as the two men stood in the shadow of the overhanging branches of a big tree. "Ridin' in from the south."

To their ears came the thudding of many hoofs, and approaching riders became tall shadows moving through the night. Bit chains jingled and saddle leather creaked. A horse snorted and a man cursed.

"Not wearing the white hoods, Senor," Blue Hawk's voice was little more than a whisper, his keen dark eyes missing nothing. "You think they are the Ghosts of Doom?"

"Bound to be," said the Masked Rider in a whisper. "Who else could they be?"

"All day I have watched like you told me," said the Yaqui. "See many men working around this castle. Dyke Tyler have big outfit."

Steel-shod hoofs echoed hollowly on wood as the band of horsemen rode across the drawbridge and into the castle courtyard. Inside the entrance lanterns gleamed dimly, lanterns that were held so low the passing horsemen cast huge weird shadows on the gray stone walls.

"Mister Jones must have got word to the gunslicks working on the ranches that he needed more men," said the Masked Rider. "Reckon he would after all of them hooded jaspers that's been killed in the last couple of days."

"Thirty men just ride in, Senor," said Blue Hawk. "Not see any sign of little boy you tell me about."

"I've got to find that kid, and find him in a hurry," said the black-clad horseman. "I must get into the castle before they close the drawbridge again."

The last of the cavalcade rode into the courtyard and the lanterns disappeared. The Masked Rider ran swiftly as he heard the groaning of the windlass and the rattling of chains as the drawbridge was slowly raised. Already there was a four-foot gap between the floor of the bridge and the platform that connected with it on the outer side of the moat.

The Masked Rider made a quick jump as the bridge rose higher. Strong fingers caught the edge and clung tightly. As the bridge went on up into the air he rose with it. Below him lapped the dark water of the moat, the breeze fluttering his black cloak as he hung there and rose higher and higher in space.

The drawbridge hid him from sight of those within the courtyard of the castle. Finally the bridge stopped moving, and he drew himself up and peered down over the inner edge. At first all he saw was the slanting surface of the bridge itself.

THEN the courtyard came dimly into view fifty feet below him. He cursed softly under his breath as he saw there was a guard stationed at a big open window to the left of the drawbridge. A shadowy form with a rifle resting across his knees as he sat on a box.

The Masked Rider realized that if he attempted to climb down the inside of the drawbridge the man was more than likely to spot him. He threw one leg over the edge of the bridge and sat there thinking swiftly.

Upon leaving Alex Page, the sheriff and the rest, he had ridden straight north across the desert until he was sure he was out of sight. Then he headed for the hideout. Here he had eaten and washed the blood from his face, cleaning up the wound made by the bullet that had creased his forehead and knocked him out.

He had not forgotten he had seen Dyke Tyler leading the Ghosts of Doom. When he had recovered at the spot where the battle took place a quick survey had assured him that the old prospector was not among the bodies scattered about. Because he had seen Tyler, he was now positive the castle was the hideout of the hooded men. Thus, he had assured Alex Page that he could find the kidnaped boy.

"Had to go alone," said the Masked Rider softly to himself as he thought about it. "Dyke Tyler and his outfit would have spotted the whole bunch before they got here if I'd let them ride with me to this castle. Besides, I can work better alone in gettin' the boy."

For a few moments he sat there on the bridge edge, listening tensely. He was in the deep shadows so there was no danger of the guard looking up and seeing him.

No sound came from below. Evidently the riders he had seen enter had disappeared somewhere further in the huge interior of the castle, leaving the one guard on duty at the drawbridge.

The floor of the drawbridge had

been built of stout planks whose surface had been worn by constant use. Now the Masked Rider chose the swiftest and most reckless way of getting down into the courtyard below. He just let himself go and started sliding down the incline of the raised bridge, boot first.

"Here goes nothing!" he muttered as he started to slide.

He moved with so much speed that it almost took his breath away. To his relief he struck no big splinters on the way down. He landed in the stone courtyard with a clatter that made the guard leap up from his chair.

"Who's there?" growled the startled fellow.

The Masked Rider's right-hand gun was in his fingers as he scrambled to his feet.

"Quiet, or I'll put a bullet in yuh," he commanded. "Put down that rifle—don't drop it!"

The guard was no fool. He knew that the roar of this black-clad man's gun would rouse the whole castle, but it might also mean his death before help arrived. He put his rifle carefully down and raised his arms high above his head.

"That's what I call sense," approved the Masked Rider, stepping forward and snatching the guard's Colt out of the holster. "Now tell me where they're keepin' that boy they kidnaped. Hurry!"

"Behind yuh," muttered the guard, peering through the shadows at something in the rear of the black-clad man. "Look out!"

HE spoke in what seemed genuine anxiety.

"Think I'd fall for an old trick like that?" demanded the Masked Rider scornfully.

"But he was right," said a grim voice behind the black-clad man, and he felt the barrel of a gun jammed into his back. "Reach before I plug yuh!"

The Masked Rider cursed softly and raised his hands high above his head, his right still clutching his gun. In doing so he let his arm swing back a little so that his hand was directly over the head of the man behind him. Abruptly his fingers released their clutch on the heavy Colt.

The man behind the Masked Rider uttered a moan of pain as the falling gun struck him on top of the head. He staggered back, momentarily removing his own weapon from the Robin Hood outlaw's back. The Masked Rider whirled like a flash and smashed a hard fist against the man's jaw. The fellow grunted once and crumpled, unconscious, to the ground.

The Masked Rider snatched out his left-hand gun and turned to confront the first man, expecting to find the guard trying to pick up his rifle. To his amazement the guard was calmly filling a pipe from a tobacco pouch.

"Nice work," he said admiringly. He struck a match and his big face was revealed in the tiny glow.

"Tom Malory!" exclaimed the Masked Rider, recognizing Dyke Tyler's big, red-headed *segundo*. "Why didn't yuh get me when yuh had the chance?"

"Why should I?" asked Malory in a whisper. "Yuh licked me once in a fair fight then give me back my gun after I missed a good chance. I ain't forgotten that. I know Dyke would want me to help the Masked Rider if he was in his right senses, but he's plumb loco."

"No time to talk now," said the Masked Rider. He picked up his other gun and as he did so he leaned close to the unconscious man on the stone floor. There was no mistaking the big face, even in the shadows.

"Hap Wilcox!" he muttered. "I thought so when I seen the smoke rising from the blacksmith shop on the Bar D. to make smoke signals that were answered from the hills."

"Shore it's Wilcox," said Malory. "Who yuh think it was—yore Aunt

Tabitha? And he's about the most dangerous gunslick in this part of the country, but feller, I'm siding you in this."

"Good!" exclaimed the Masked Rider.

"Save the cheerin' till the ropin' is over," said Tom Malory. "There's a little kind of store-room right near the entrance here. If somebody was to tie and gag that tub of lard, he could be among the missin'. I've got the key to that store-room."

"Then Wilcox is gonna be absent plumb sudden," said the Masked Rider.

Five minutes later the unconscious foreman of the Bar D was bound with rope that Malory produced, gagged with his own neckerchief, and locked in the store-room.

"Where are they keeping the kid?" asked the Masked Rider.

"Fourth door on the right along the corridor on the second floor of the left wing. Be careful!" said Malory as he picked up his rifle and again seated himself on the box. He yawned as the Masked Rider disappeared in the shadows. "Shore is quiet around here tonight. Ain't seen a soul around since them jaspers rode in a little while ago."

NOISELESSLY the black-clad man moved on to the castle and entered the left wing of the place. Here he saw a dim light burning at the far end of a wide corridor. He was fascinated by the way the old prospector had captured the medieval spirit in furnishing the huge structure. Suits of armor lined the corridor on either side. Six of them looked so realistic in the shadows that he could almost believe the men who had worn the coats of mail and helmets were still inside.

There were crossed broad swords, lances and shields hanging on the walls. Ahead of him to his left he saw a marble staircase leading to the second floor of the castle, a staircase that was a thing of beauty in design and construction.

"Shore is some place," muttered the Masked Rider softly as he looked about him. "Now why should a man rich enough to build a castle like this suddenly turn outlaw and start raiding with a bunch of killers even if his gold claim did give out and he's dead broke now?"

Things that he had noticed and remembered since coming to this desert country made the Masked Rider feel he was beginning to find the answer to all that had been going on.

In his estimation Dyke Tyler's mine was a vital factor, but there was more to it all than just that—a great deal more.

"No time to try and figger it out now," said the black-clad man as he moved on. "First thing I've got to do is find Alex Page's son and get the boy safely out of here."

He was conscious of the danger that lurked all about him in the shadows of this huge castle. He knew that the lower regions of the place were filled with hard-eyed gunslicks who would blast him down if they caught sight of him. His hands were close to his guns, ready for a quick draw as he reached the marble stairs and started up. The keen blue eyes that looked through the holes in the mask were constantly probing the shadows, his ears were straining for the slightest sound from his foes.

It was the tomblike silence of the castle that puzzled him. He had seen nearly thirty men ride into the courtyard just a little while ago. But why had they ridden down the ramp that led to the mine below? To hide their loot in the many passageways down there in that huge space beneath the castle?

Could they even have taken there the freight wagon trains that had vanished so mysteriously and completely from the desert?

Speculating about several things, the Masked Rider went on up the stairs. A yellow glow bathed the marble steps from a huge candelabrum full of lighted candles that hung above the gleaming steps.

As he ascended he was clearly revealed in the light, a tall, black-clad, mysterious figure that climbed silently upward.

HE grew tense as he heard footsteps above him. He was too far up the stairs to turn and run down out of sight. There was nothing to do but keep on going. He drew his guns at the same instant that a hard-looking man appeared at the head of the stairs above him.

"The Masked Rider!" shouted the startled guard, his hand flashing to his holster.

His gun was out and roaring as the Masked Rider fired once. The gunslick pitched forward and came rolling down the stairs as a bullet smashed in his chest. The Masked Rider leaped to one side so that the tumbling body just missed him as it thumped on down the stairs.

Below, on the first floor of the castle, there now sounded excited shouts and the pounding of many feet. They were coming after him—he would have to move fast.

He raced up the remaining steps and found himself in the corridor of the left wing of the castle. Closed doors lined the wide hall.

"Where did he go?" shouted a mad voice from the foot of the stairs. "Look! He's killed Denver!"

The Masked Rider dashed along the hall until he found the fourth door on the right. There was a key sticking in the lock. He turned the key, unlocked the door and stepped into the room.

"The Masked Rider!" exclaimed a childish voice. "Daddy told me about you. I'm not afraid now—not very much, anyway."

CHAPTER XVI

A Brave Boy

JERKING out the key and inserting it on the other side, the Masked Rider locked the door from the inside. Then he dropped the one gun he was still holding back in the holster and turned around. The room was big and barren, the only furnishing a rough wooden table and chair. An oil lamp was burning on the table and the little Page boy sat on the edge of the chair.

"Hello, Sonny," said the Masked Rider with a smile. "You are right. I'm the Masked Rider, and I'm yore friend, too."

"That's nice," piped Sonny Page, nodding. He was dressed in a complete miniature cowboy outfit. A little flannel shirt, levis with leather chaps pulled on over the trousers, tiny cowboy boots and even a small gun in a holster. "That old man said he was my friend, but they came and took him away." The boy was trying hard to be brave, but after all he was only six and badly frightened. "Could we please go home now?"

"We'll go soon," said the Masked Rider soothingly in a low tone. He was listening tensely. As soon as the men in the castle found the door of the boy's prison locked from the inside they would know where the Masked Rider had gone. "Who was the old man that was yore friend?"

"He said I was to call him Uncle Dyke," said Sonny. "He likes little boys. He told me so. Then the men came with guns and took him away." The boy suddenly drew his own gun, and the Masked Rider saw it was made of wood and painted a blue-steel color. "Bang!" said Sonny, pointing the gun at the black-clad man.

"Yuh got me!" The Masked Rider staggered, and put his hand over his

breast. "Plumb through the heart."

The little boy laughed gleefully. "I like you," he said. "When I shot those men with the funny hoods they just swore at me. You wouldn't do that, would you?"

"I shore wouldn't," the Masked Rider promised solemnly.

He went to the single window in the room, opened the lower sash and peered out. Nearly fifty feet below the water in the moat around the castle reflected the stars in the deep blue sky.

The black-clad man was worried. He was willing to fight his way out of the castle with guns blazing, but he couldn't do so and take the boy along, risking the little fellow's life. He realized that he had to find some other way to get the child out of the castle.

He swung around, his hands streaking for the guns in his holster as he heard voices out in the corridor. Someone rattled the doorknob.

"Gee!" said Sonny, watching him in admiration. "You shore can draw fast!"

"He's in here!" shouted a voice from outside. "I hear the kid talkin' to him, and the door's locked from the inside. Come on, men, break it down!"

"Don't move, Sonny," said the Masked Rider. "I'm going to drive those men away from the door."

He raised his heavy Colts and sent a withering blast of lead tearing through the wood of the door. From outside there came curses and a cry of pain, and he knew at least one of his bullets had struck home.

"I don't like this," said the boy, his lip quivering, and his eyes filling. "Can't we go home now?"

The Masked Rider dropped to the floor, bringing the boy with him as guns roared outside in the hall. He heard the whine of bullets as they passed over his head.

"Yuh got to be brave, like yore dad would want yuh to be, Sonny," said the Masked Rider softly. "You and me are gonna take a long chance. We got to play like there are too many Indians for us to fight, and we have to escape. Understand, Sonny?"

THE child nodded, his eyes big and grave. Outside the attackers were assaulting the door, smashing it down with an ax. The Masked Rider put his guns back into their holsters, jamming them into leather as tightly as they would go. He picked the boy gently up in his arms and strode to the window.

"We're gonna jump, Sonny," he said. "Can yuh dive?"

"Shore," said Sonny bravely. "And swim, too. Daddy taught me to swim in the river."

"Good!" The Masked Rider swung his long legs over the wondow sill and sat there for an instant, the boy still in his arms. Behind him there was the crash of splintering wood as the men in the corridor broke the door down. "Remember to keep yore mouth closed when we hit the water. Here we go!"

He flung himself out into space and went hurtling down, the boy held firmly in his arms. They hit the water in the moat with a loud splash and disappeared beneath the surface. The man was careful to take most of the shock, but the impact jarred the boy out of his grasp, and they came to the surface some distance apart.

The Masked Rider's guns and clothing weighed him down, making swimming difficult, but as he broke through the water and drew fresh air into his lungs his first thought was of the boy. To his left he heard splashing sounds. He looked in that direction and saw the boy had come to the surface and was swimming strongly toward the outer wall of the moat.

"There they are!" shouted one of the men from the room above as he peered out of the window. "Down in the moat!"

A gun roared and flamed, and a bul-

let splashed the water as it struck.

"This way, Sonny," called the Masked Rider swimming along the moat so that he and the boy would be out of angle of range of the murderous fire from the men in the window. "Put yore hand on my shoulder."

The little boy had not been boasting when he had said he could swim. He plowed through the water and reached the black-clad man in a few quick strokes. Then they headed for the protection of the raised drawbridge in front of the castle. Once they were beneath that raised platform it would be impossible for anyone to hit them by firing at them through the windows.

They reached their objective safely and caught hold of some low hanging chains and clung there beneath the abutment of the bridge.

"Quick, Senor," called the voice of Blue Hawk from the opposite side of the moat. "Have rope here, tied to my horse. Pull you out quick."

"Come on, Sonny," said the Masked Rider. "We'll swim to the other side, and that good Indian will help us to get out of here."

Both the black-clad man and the boy had lost their hats when they had hit the water, and they had made no attempt to find them. Hats did not matter. The important thing was to get away as swiftly as possible.

The Masked Rider started swimming, the boy holding to his shoulder, and they reached the other side of the moat safely. The black-clad man found the rope the Yaqui had lowered and grasped it firmly with both hands.

"Put yore arms around my neck and hold on tight, Sonny," he ordered.

OBEDIENTLY the boy did as he was told, and at a word from the Masked Rider the Yaqui led his gray away so that the horse dragged the man and boy up over the edge of the outer wall of the moat. At once the Masked Rider released his grip on the rope and scrambled to his feet. Sonny Page unlocked his arms from around the black-clad man's neck.

"They are coming, Senor!" exclaimed Blue Hawk as he heard the groaning of the windlass and the rattling of chains as the men inside the castle lowered the drawbridge to pursue the escaping fugitives. "Midnight right back there under the tree. Blue Hawk hold them off until you get away with the boy."

"All right, Hawk!"

The Masked Rider grabbed the dripping boy up in his arms and ran toward the spot where the Yaqui had left the black stallion. He swung the boy up in front of him and then climbed into the kak. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw that Blue Hawk had mounted his gray and was riding toward a cluster of rocks near the entrance of the castle.

The Yaqui was drawing his rifle out of the sheath as he rode, the rope dragging on the ground behind the horse. The drawbridge was coming down slowly, mounted men waiting impatiently in the castle courtyard. The Masked Rider urged Midnight into a gallop, heading for Alex Page's spread far to the south across the desert.

"We go home now?" asked Sonny, shivering from the wet clothes and cold night wind.

"That's right, button," said the Masked Rider, wrapping his cloak around the lad. "We're heading home right this minute."

Behind him he heard the steady cracking of a rifle, and knew that Blue Hawk was preventing the Ghosts of Doom from following. It would be sheer suicide on their part to ride across the drawbridge while the Indian was peppering them with bullets from his Winchester.

Midnight's flashing hoofs ate up distance, and soon the Masked Rider could no longer hear the Yaqui's rifle. He was not worried about Blue

Hawk's safety in facing such great odds alone. He knew that the Yaqui would keep the men at the castle at bay only until the Masked Rider was far enough away to frustrate pursuit. Then the Indian would quietly disappear.

When they had traveled about five miles the black-clad man halted Midnight in a canyon at the edge of the desert. Here he built a small fire, and the heat of the flames swiftly warmed them both and dried out their clothing.

"The fire feels good," said Sonny. "I'm not cold now." He looked at the man beside him adoringly. "I bet Daddy will be surprised when we tell him how we jumped in the water and everything."

"Yuh shore are a brave lad," praised the Masked Rider. "Guess yore dad was right in boastin' about yuh."

As he stood there the Masked Rider was thinking swiftly. It had been as Wayne Morgan that he had promised Alex Page to bring the boy back safely, but it was the Masked Rider who had rescued the son of the cattleman. The boy would think it very strange if he went off and left him and then returned in the character of Morgan to take him home.

NOW that he had positive proof the castle was the hideout of the Ghosts of Doom, the Masked Rider was determined to round up all of the ranchers and their outfits and lead them in an attack on the place at once. In his estimation the hooded men were like rats that had to be exterminated before there could be peace in this desert country.

Thus, Wayne Morgan, the man whom Les Dabney thought was a railroad detective and whom Sheriff Bob Field considered an escaped prisoner, had outlived his usefulness in the present case. It would be the Masked Rider who finished this battle against the Ghosts of Doom, and Wayne Morgan would simply be among the missing.

"I heard those men talk at the castle," said Sonny suddenly. "They said there was a gold mine in the cellar, but there wasn't any more gold in it. So Mr. Jones would have to work fast. Isn't that a funny place to have a mine."

"It shore is," said the Masked Rider half to himself. "I thought that from the first, but Dyke Tyler is a strange hombre."

"I like Uncle Dyke," said the boy. "He told me that he had a heap of dinero salted away. That means money, doesn't it?"

"Right." The Masked Rider nodded. "Go on, Sonny; what else did Uncle Dyke say?"

"That was all. Then the men with the guns took him away," said the boy. "Why?"

"The sidewinder!" muttered the black-clad man. "First, he must have figgered on gettin' the mine from Tyler, and then when he found the claim was played out, he tried another angle."

"You talk silly," Sonny said and laughed. "What would a rattlesnake want with a gold mine?"

"I'm talking about a human rattlesnake," said the Masked Rider as he carefully tramped out the fire. "Come on, button. Let's get you home!"

CHAPTER XVII

Neil Ramsey Talks

WITH the coming of dawn Alex Page ceased pacing up and down the porch of his ranchhouse and dropped wearily into a chair. All the long afternoon and night he had been waiting and hoping, haunted by memories of his little son. Sonny laughing gleefully as he galloped around the spread on his little

pony. Sonny pretending that he was a sheriff out after badmen, and the waddies of the outfit playing with him, making believe that they were outlaws that he had shot with his little wooden gun.

But there were other things that lingered in Page's mind besides the thoughts of his son. The way Wayne Morgan had ridden out into the desert alone after assuring Page that he would bring the boy back. How close Sheriff Field had come to arresting Page when he had interfered with the law.

Now Alex Page wondered if the sheriff had been right. Suppose that Morgan had merely been lying, that he had said he could find the boy merely to get a chance to get away from this part of the country? Sheriff Field had suggested that, but Reece Sutton and the rest had not agreed with the young lawman.

"No, that just couldn't be," Page muttered to himself as he had done many times before during the long weary hours that had passed. "But I agreed that if Morgan didn't show up by mornin' I would join the sheriff and the rest when they went looking for the Ghosts of Doom again today. I'll do it, too. Mebbe it will bring back my boy."

Dawn broke in the east, bathing the rangeland with the light of a new day. From the bunkhouse came the sounds of the men awakening and getting ready for work. In the kitchen of the ranchhouse pots and pans rattled and banged as Mrs. White, the housekeeper, began to prepare breakfast for the AP crew.

She came to the front door finally and looked out sympathetically at the owner of the spread. A big, strong woman with gray hair, her eyes were red from weeping, for she had adored Sonny.

"No word yet?" she asked hopelessly, already knowing the answer from the expression on Page's face.

"Nothing," he said slowly. "But I'm still hoping. If—"

He leaped to his feet. In the distance a rider was approaching the house.

"What's the matter?" demanded Mrs. White. "Land sakes, you act like a bee stung you!"

Alex Page did not answer. He was straining his eyes, trying to recognize the rider even though the horseman was still too far away. Then his heart sank into his boots. The newcomer was the Masked Rider, not Morgan. He was carrying something wrapped in a blanket in his arms.

"It's the Masked Rider," said Page slowly, his voice flat and dead. "And he is carrying something still in his arms—something that doesn't move. It—it might be—Sonny."

The woman uttered a little cry of protest. Both of them stood there motionless as the black-clad horseman rode up. The Masked Rider slid out of the saddle, still carrying his blanket-covered burden. There was no mistaking those tiny boots that stuck out from beneath the edge of the blanket.

"My boy!" muttered Page brokenly. "Yuh brought him back to me—dead."

"Dead—my eye!" said the Masked Rider. "He's just sleepin'."

SONNY awoke and poked his head up out of the blanket as he heard voices.

"Hello, Daddy," he said sleepily. "The Masked Rider is my friend."

Alex Page stumbled almost blindly down the steps of the porch and grabbed the boy hungrily into his arms. Tears were streaming down his face unashamedly as he clung tightly to his motherless son.

"Sonny," he murmured. "Yuh've come home."

"How you do take on," said Mrs. White, snorting to hide her real feelings. "Can't you see the boy is tired and dirty and probably hungry, too.

You give him to me and I'll take care of him, Alex Page."

The big rancher nodded mutely and handed over the boy. She took the child, burst into tears, and disappeared inside the house. Page wiped his face with a bandanna handkerchief and looked at the Masked Rider.

"Where did yuh find him?" he asked.

"At Dyke Tyler's castle," answered the Masked Rider in grim tones. "That's the hideout of the Ghosts of Doom."

"Wayne Morgan went after him," said Page. "He said he would bring Sonny back to me safe. Then he was lying, after all."

"Morgan wasn't lying," said the Masked Rider quietly. "He found the boy at the castle. He told me he had seen Dyke Tyler among the hooded men that you all were fighting yesterday."

"No wonder he knew where to go," Alex Page said. "But where is Morgan now?"

"He tried to get into the castle, but they spotted him before he could make it. He fought but he was wounded bad. I met him out on the desert." The Masked Rider was lying deliberately, and he felt a little like he was attending his own funeral, but he had decided this way was best. "He asked me to save the boy for you and I did."

"Then Morgan cashed in his chips?" asked Page anxiously.

"He's gone," the Masked Rider evaded. "But there ain't no time to talk, Page. I want yuh to get yore men ready to ride while I go see if I can't get the rest of the outfits around here, too. We'll raid Tyler's castle and clean out them Ghosts of Doom."

"Yuh're damn right we will!" exclaimed Alex Page. Relief at finding his son safe once more had given away to rage against the men who had kidnaped the boy. "We'll get every able-bodied man in this part of the country. We'll show them varmints!"

"Good!" exclaimed the Masked Rider. "I'm heading for the Box S now to see Reece Sutton. Get yore men and meet us where the stage road starts across the desert. And yuh might send some of yore riders to town and to some of the other spreads, if yuh will. I can't go everywhere."

"Of course," said Page. "I'll do it right away."

The Masked Rider whirled Midnight, and the big black horse galloped away. It did not take long for the stallion to travel the three miles between the AP ranch and Reece Sutton's spread. When he reached the Box S, the black-clad horseman found a tense air of excitement hanging over the place.

GRIM-EYED waddies were hastily roping and saddling their horses, and Norma Sutton stood on the porch of the ranchhouse holding a handkerchief to her eyes as though she were crying. Reece Sutton was standing beside her, shaking his head slowly as he said something.

"What's the matter?" demanded the Masked Rider quickly as he halted his horse close to the porch. "Is there something wrong?"

"It's Neil Ramsey," answered Sutton. "Yuh know he was wounded yesterday. Just a few minutes ago a big man on a bay horse, and with a bandanna mask hiding his face sneaked up and shot Ramsey again and galloped away. The boy is dying."

"He—he asked us to go away and leave him alone," sobbed Norma. "He said he didn't want to see anyone."

"Mebbe he'll talk to me," said the Masked Rider as he swung out of the saddle and ground-hitched Midnight. "Yuh mind if I try?"

"Of course not," said Reece Sutton. "Go ahead." He nodded toward the open door of the ranchhouse. "He's right in there on the couch in the parlor."

The Masked Rider stepped inside.

He found Neil Ramsey lying on his back on the couch. The young rancher's face was white and strained, and it was obvious that he did not have long to live. The second bullet had entered his right lung.

"Ramsey," said the Masked Rider softly as he stood beside the couch. "There anything I can do for yuh?"

Ramsey opened his eyes and looked at the black-clad man.

"The Masked Rider," he murmured weakly. "I'll talk to you. Couldn't say anything to others—feel like a Judas."

"Then Pete Osborne wasn't lying," said the Masked Rider softly. "Yuh were working with the Ghosts of Doom undercover. I figgered that. Yuh nearly fooled me when yuh told me Osborne was lying about yuh, though."

"Easier—when yuh tell it for me," said the wounded man. "I really love Norma. Didn't realize what I'd got myself into until the hooded men attacked stage. He hired me—look at my right arm."

The Masked Rider pushed back the sleeve of Ramsey's flannel shirt. On the young rancher's arm was the same horseshoe brand that the Robin Hood outlaw and the Yaqui had seen on the arms of every dead hooded man they had examined.

"What does it mean?" he asked.

"Brand of the Lucky Legion," muttered Neil Ramsey. "He made us all wear it. We were willing for he paid us well."

"Back in the canyon where yuh were drygulched yuh acted like yuh were afraid of Leland Blunt," said the Masked Rider. "Was that because yuh knew that he—"

"I lied, Norma," said Ramsay suddenly, sitting up and looking at someone behind the Masked Rider. "It was Pete who told the truth."

The Masked Rider glanced over his shoulder and saw the blond daughter of Sutton standing in the doorway. Her face was pale, but her brown eyes were kind as she came forward to the dying man and took his hand gently.

"I know, Neil," said the girl quietly. "I heard. It doesn't matter. Your love for me was honest."

A smile lighted Ramsey's face, and then he shuddered and grew still. For an instant Norma still held his hand. Then she looked up at the Masked Rider, and he nodded solemnly.

"He died happy," said the black-clad man. "You gave him that, Norma."

THE girl released the dead man's hand and stood up. She was crying softly. She gained control of herself in a few moments and turned to the Masked Rider.

"You asked him why he was afraid of Leland Blunt," she said. "Do you know?"

"That's a question I can't answer now," said the Masked Rider. "I've got to see yore father right away." He paused as he reached the door. "There ain't no need of anyone but you and me ever knowing what we do about Ramsey. Reckon yuh can convince Pete Osborne he was wrong? He loves yuh, too."

"I know." Norma looked him straight in the eye. "And I love Pete—better than anyone. Somehow, I'm glad that Neil will never have to know that." She turned back to the couch and lightly kissed the dead man on the forehead. "Good-by, Neil," she said softly. "I'm sure you are happier now."

The Masked Rider stepped quietly out onto the porch. He found Reece Sutton waiting there. As the old rancher looked at him the black-clad man nodded.

"Ramsey's dead," he said briefly. "But there's something more important now than looking for his killer. We'll find him with the rest of the white hoods. I want you and yore men to help raid the hideout of the Ghosts of Doom."

Sutton listened as the Masked Rider went on and told him what he had discovered regarding Dyke Tyler's castle.

"Dyke Tyler?" exclaimed the owner of the Box S. "I can't believe it! Why, we all know and liked the old man around this part of the country. Many a time I grubstaked him back in the days before he made his strike. He never forgot either. Offered me a share of his claim, but I refused it."

"And in the past few months yuh've noticed that the old man has changed," said the Masked Rider as the rancher paused. "Ain't that so?"

"Of course, it is," admitted Sutton. "But we just couldn't believe that he would permit his castle to be used for a hideout for those hooded killers. That's why we have been looking for some place else on the desert. We were shore Dyke wouldn't allow anything like that."

"He didn't," said the Masked Rider cryptically. "But come on, get yore men, and let's get riding. The sooner we get to the castle the better."

"Right," said Sutton. "Some of my men are already out looking for the man who shot Ramsey. We didn't even see him until afterwards when he was riding away from the house. I'll gather up the rest of the boys. We're to all meet at the stage road, yuh say?"

"That's it," said the Masked Rider. "I'll see yuh there. I'm heading for the Bar D now."

CHAPTER XVIII

Killer's Lair

POUNDING hoofs thundered over the ground as Midnight carried the Masked Rider closer and closer to the big Bar D spread. The black-clad horseman's eyes narrowed as he saw heavy black smoke rising high into the clear blue sky. He topped a rise above the ranch and as he looked down the steep hill he saw that the smoke was coming from the blacksmith shop.

"Just what I figgered," he muttered as he rode swiftly down the hill. "Sending smoke signals to warn them at the castle that there is trouble. Must have a lookout somewhere out on the desert that answers and relays them signals the way the Indians used to do."

He galloped directly toward the blacksmith shop. As he drew closer he ducked low in the saddle as he caught the glint of sunlight on a rifle barrel that had been thrust through a window of the shack. The rifle cracked, and a bullet whistled above the head of the black-clad man.

His gun was in his right hand and roaring as he rode close to the window. The man with the rifle reeled back, his face hidden by a curtain of blood as the Masked Rider's bullet struck him in the forehead.

Les Dabney came dashing out of the ranchhouse. He looked at the Masked Rider in a startled fashion, hesitated, and then ran forward, making no attempt to draw his own gun.

"What the hell is the idea of killing one of my men?" he demanded. "Yuh gone plumb loco?"

"He was sending smoke signals to the Ghosts of Doom," said the Masked Rider. "Reckon yuh got some jaspers yuh can't trust on yore spread, Dabney."

"Smoke signals!" exclaimed Dabney. "So that's why so many of the new men in my outfit have been working in the blacksmith shop from time to time. I never even suspected. But what brings you here?"

The Masked Rider told him quickly of the planned raid on the castle. The big ranch owner listened, frowning. He finally nodded.

"All right," he said. "I'll round up my boys, and join the rest of yuh at the stage road."

"I'll ride with yuh," said the Masked Rider. "Alex Page has men notifying the other spreads and the men in town. There ain't no more I can do now."

"Suit yoreself," said Dabney. He shouted loudly to the men who had begun to gather from all directions at the sound of the shooting. "Get everybody and be ready to ride!" He cursed as he looked around him. "Shore would like to know what's happened to that fat foreman of mine. Ain't seen him since yesterday afternoon."

"Reckon he's safe enough," said the Masked Rider, wondering if Hap Wilcox was still bound and gagged and hidden in the store-room off the courtyard of the castle. "He'll turn up soon." A thought struck him as he gazed at the white-faced steer that was grazing with some other cattle not far away. "Did yuh get that trail herd to the railroad safely that yuh was driving across the desert the day before yesterday?"

"Shore," said Les Dabney. "Never had no more trouble after we chased them hooded jaspers away. We got through all right."

"That's good," said the Masked Rider.

IN a few minutes the Bar D outfit was mounted and ready. Dabney swung into the saddle of a big roan that one of his men brought him.

"Figgered yuh'd want a fresh hoss instead of Buck," said the waddy as he turned the reins over to his boss. "Yuh shore rode him hard."

"All right, boys, let's go," called out Dabney as he swung into the saddle. "Come on!"

"I'll string along in back of yore men," said the Masked Rider. "Some of them new members of yore outfit just might get impulsive enough to try and put a bullet in my back if I was to ride in the lead with you."

Dabney glanced at him, shrugged his shoulders and then rode on in the lead of his men. The Masked Rider followed along behind. There were forty men in Les Dabney's outfit if they were all present now. It looked as though it took a lot of waddies to run a spread the size of the Bar D.

Soon they reached the place where the stage road stopped at the edge of the desert. There was a large bunch of riders gathered there and horsemen were constantly drifting to the spot from the west and from the south. The Masked Rider saw Alex Page and his men gathered in one group, and Reece Sutton and his Box S crew in another.

Sheriff Bob Field and his two deputies headed a posse from Gold Strike that appeared to consist of every man in the town who could fork a horse. Even old Ed Kimball, the stage driver, was there, along with Sam Judson, the express guard, whose head was no longer bandaged. They were mounted on horses that looked as if they had seen a lot of use. Both men seemed at home in the saddle.

The Masked Rider rode to the sheriff, drew Field aside and said a few words to the young lawman. Field looked surprised but finally nodded, and rode away.

"Watch the new men in yore outfit," said the Masked Rider softly, as he rode close to Reece Sutton. "Be ready to blast them down if they should happen to turn on yuh."

"Figger the undercover men from the Ghosts of Doom are ridin' with us?" asked Reece Sutton. "Yuh might be right at that."

"I'm shore of it," said the Masked Rider grimly. "And they are gonna come out in the open and try to down us all if they get the chance. So be ready, Sutton!"

He told Page and the other ranchers the same thing—careful that none of their men overheard his words. He saw the ranchers drawing certain men in their outfits aside and saying a word or two to them in an undertone, and he knew that these were waddies

who could be trusted by their bosses.

"All right!" shouted Sheriff Field. "Let's go, men!"

The sheriff and his big posse led the cavalcade of horsemen as they thinned out and headed northward across the desert toward the castle of Dyke Tyler. The Masked Rider rode with the stout deputy on one side of him and the sheriff on the other. Muddy Waters rode directly behind the black-clad horseman.

Behind the posse came the ranchers and their men. There were at least a hundred horsemen altogether.

"Listen, Sorrow," the Masked Rider said quietly to the stout deputy. "There's bound to be some of those sidewinders riding under cover with us now. What we got to do is bring them out into the open before they get a chance to turn on us."

"Shore," said Boswell. "But how are we gonna do it?"

"You are going to pretend you are one of them," said the Masked Rider. "They can't all know everybody who is workin' with them, so they'll believe it for a few minutes, anyway."

FOR a moment more the black-clad man talked quietly, and the deputy listened with interest. Finally Boswell nodded.

"I'll do it," he agreed. "It might work, at that. You tell me when."

They rode on for another mile. The Masked Rider glanced back over his shoulder. He saw Les Dabney's big silver watch suddenly gleam in the sunlight as the owner of the Bar D looked at the time.

"Now, Boswell!" snapped the Masked Rider.

Abruptly Sorrow Boswell swung out of line, his horse going at a gallop as he jabbed it with the spurs. He swung around in his saddle and fired a shot that whistled by the Masked Rider's right ear.

"All you Lucky Legion men over here to the left!" shouted the fat deputy. "Come on, boys!"

Fully forty of the men riding with the cavalcade promptly spurred their horses to the left, drawing their guns as they did so. Fifteen of them were from the Bar D outfit, but the ranch owner was not among them. His guns began blazing at the traitors in his crew.

The rest of the men from the ranches and the town were ready, and the gunslicks that had formed the Lucky Legion began to go down beneath a withering blast of gunfire before they had their own weapons more than half out of holsters. Some of them did manage to fire, but the quick reaction of the men under the command of the sheriff and the Masked Rider took them by surprise.

"Hey, don't shoot at me!" yelled the fat deputy as a bullet came dangerously close to him. "I ain't one of them. I was just the bait."

"That's right!" called the Masked Rider, his guns blazing in his hands. "Boswell is on our side."

The battle was fast and furious, and within ten minutes there were forty dead or badly wounded men sprawled out on the white sands of the desert. The surprise had been most successful.

"Yuh'll find that everyone of them has a small horseshoe branded on the upper part of his right arm," called out the Masked Rider. "That's why they called themselves the Lucky Legion."

"No time to bother to make shore of that now," said the sheriff. "Come on, men, we're heading for the castle. We know who we can trust now."

As they rode onward it dawned on the Masked Rider that there were two important men missing from among those present — Warren Hickey and Leland Blunt. He rode up beside Sheriff Field. "Yuh seen Blunt or Hickey around today?" he asked.

"No, I haven't." The sheriff frowned as he glanced at the black-clad man who rode beside him. "That's

shore strange, ain't it? Hickey has been talkin' more than anybody about cleaning out the Ghosts of Doom."

"I know," said the Masked Rider. "Even talked of forming a vigilante committee to wipe out the hooded men."

"We won't need that after today," said the sheriff. "Say, Alex Page told me how Morgan died trying to save his boy and how you brought Sonny home safely this morning. What I don't understand is what the Ghosts of Doom hoped to gain by kidnaping the boy in the first place."

"There's only one way I can figger that," said the Masked Rider slowly. "They knew that as long as they had the boy Alex Page would not come near them, nor would he let the men in his outfit fight them either, for that would mean the boy's life. I think they also figgered on kidnaping Reece Sutton's daughter and holding her as a hostage, too. And mebbe the kin of other men around here they could capture. At least, that's the way it looks to me."

"I believe yuh're right," the sheriff said thoughtfully. "The boy happened to be their first victim."

"And their last," added the Masked Rider grimly.

TWO hours later the band of riders were approaching the castle. Their number was smaller now, for they had depleted their forces by weeding out the men of the traitorous Lucky Legion. It was mid-afternoon, and the long ride across the hot desert had made their tempers short. Their attitude toward Dyke Tyler and the hooded men was growing more and more vindictive.

(Continued on page 101)

Next Issue's Novel: The Masked Rider in FLAMING RIVER

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BAD MAN'S WAY

By RALEY BRIEN

Author of "It Had to Be Done," "Good Old Mac," etc.

Concho Charley Asks No Quarter of Any Man—but Sheriff Harvey Can Whirl and Draw on a Dime!

SHERIFF MATT HARVEY stood for a moment in the door of his office, gazing somberly down the single street of the little cowtown.

A faint breeze blew puffs of gray dust across the plank walks. Down at the general store, old Jim Parker of the Flying H climbed down off the seat of a spring wagon, leaving his six-year-old grandson, Billy, proudly holding the reins of the two-horse team.

The old lawman wasn't interested in Jim Parker. His gaze was fixed on a pinto horse that stood at the hitch-rack in front of the saloon. There was no mistaking that horse. The pinto belonged to "Concho Charley" Rand, who bore a reputation as a tough hombre.

"Reckon I better get goin'," muttered the sheriff. "Concho Charley ain't welcome around here no more, and the sooner he knows it the better."

Harvey loosened the Colt he wore in a holster on his right hip, making sure the gun was working free and easy. Then he marched slowly down the street toward the saloon.

He passed the spring wagon and smiled at the kid, who was still proudly holding the horses. Little Billy just nodded, too proud to pay much attention to the sheriff.

Concho Charley whirled

Inside the saloon, Concho Charley stood alone at the bar. He was big and tough, with two guns tied low on his hips.

His face looked as if it had been carved out of rock and the sculptor had tired of the job before finishing. The blue eyes were like marbles—hard and expressionless.

"Yuh walked plumb into trouble," said the barkeeper, gazing at his solitary customer. "Sheriff Harvey is on the prod. Claims he's gonna clean out all the gun-toters in this neck of the woods, pronto."

"I ain't lookin' for trouble and I reckon Harvey knows that," growled Concho Charley. "But if it comes

after me, I'll shore meet it halfway."

He whirled, hands streaking for his guns as the sheriff stepped in through the bat wing doors.

The old lawman shouted something. He ducked out into the street just as Concho Charley sent a bullet crashing through the panel of one of the swinging doors. Harvey's gun roared from outside and a hole appeared in the other batwing.

"Get out of here!" shouted the bartender. "Just cause you two want to kill each other, that ain't no reason for smashin' up my saloon doin' it."

"Hey, Sheriff!" shouted Concho Charley. "How about makin' this a fair fight out in the open?"

"Come on out!" called the old lawman. "I got my gun back in the holster."

Rand thrust his Colts back into leather and swaggered out through the batwings. The sheriff was standing a little distance down the street, his gun holstered as he waited.

"Wait a minute, Concho," said the old sheriff. "I want to—"

"Shut up and draw!" snapped Concho Charley as he grabbed for his guns.

Abruptly the two horses hitched to the spring wagon reared high. They had been unnerved by the shots at the door of the saloon. Now the sunlight gleaming on the nickel-plated badge on the sheriff's vest had been reflected into the eye of one. Little Billy Parker sat terrified as the reins were torn from his grasp and the wagon went careening along the street.

CONCHO CHARLEY had his guns half-drawn when he saw the runaway horses galloping toward him. The sheriff was standing open-mouthed as the wagon rolled by him. His hand was still on his gun butt and he presented a perfect target for Concho Charley. The expert gun-toter cursed and dropped his guns back into the holsters.

He knew he had to stop the wagon and save the little boy. He was too fond of horses to shoot the runaway team deliberately in order to stop the wagon. Besides, he realized that might mean a tangle of falling horses, which would overturn the vehicle and throw the kid out.

If he didn't stop it, the team and wagon might go hurtling down into the gulch just beyond the south end of the town.

"Whoa!" Concho Charley shouted.

He made a flying leap and caught the bridle of the off horse. The animal dragged him for fifty yards before he finally managed to halt the team. The sheriff had come running after him, grabbed the horse on the left side and helped halt the team.

Jim Parker had come racing out of the general store when he had heard the shooting, but the old rancher hadn't been able to move fast enough to reach the wagon before it started. Now he came stumbling up, grabbed his grandson off the seat and held the boy in his trembling arms.

"Aw, put me down, Grandpa," protested little Billy. "I could have stopped those horses if they hadn't jerked the reins out of my hands."

"Yuh still want me, Sheriff?" demanded Concho Charley. "Want to finish our fracas?"

He was bruised and battered and covered with dust, but he was still game. Sheriff Harvey grinned and studied him, then came to a sudden but final decision.

"Shore I want yuh, Concho Charley," he said, his grin vanishing. "There's been too many tough hombres around this here town. I need a good deputy to help me clean them out. Yuh willing to take the job?"

For a moment the gun-toter glared at the sheriff in amazement. When the startling idea finally sank in, he smiled in embarrassment.

"Why didn't yuh say so in the first place?" he demanded. "Always did

kind of like yuh, Sheriff. I was afraid I might have to kill yuh if it come to a showdown, and it looked like it was gonna be."

"Mebbe it mighta been you that got sent to Boot Hill," said the sheriff. "Suppose I show yuh, just friendly-like, that you ain't even shadin' me on the draw."

"All right." Concho Charley grinned and glanced at the old rancher, who was watching and listening in amazement. "When Parker says go, we'll reach for our irons."

"Suits me." Sheriff Harvey nodded. "Whenever yuh're ready, Jim, say the word."

"Go!" snapped Jim Parker.

Concho Charley's hands flashed down. As he touched the butts of his guns, he saw that the sheriff already had him covered by a lightning-like draw.

"Yuh win, Sheriff," admitted Concho Charley Rand. "Reckon when I saved the kid, I shore saved my own life at the same time. Yuh got yuh a good deputy from now on."

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OUTLAW POSSE

By REEVE WALKER

Author of "Flying Cowboy," "Paige of the Pony Express," etc.

As he galloped across the valley floor, Sheriff Tom Adams ducked low in the saddle. Abruptly a bullet whistled dangerously close to his head. Behind Adams thundered his pursuers, five grim-faced riders with guns out and roaring.

"First time I ever heard of a sheriff bein' chased by his own posse!" thought Adams. "Shore was foolish o' me to pick them jiggers!"

The sheriff realized that he had stepped into a trap. On returning to the little town of Gunsmoke that morning after having been away on official business, he had learned that the town bank had been robbed just an hour before his return. Most of the citizens had gone in pursuit of the outlaws. Adams had started after the band of angry citizens, but as he reached the edge of the town he had encountered the five horsemen.

The leader, a hawk-faced man named Nelson, had told the sheriff that they were waddies from the Cross-O outfit, returning from driving a trail herd. Adams had told them about the bank robbery and they had left with him as part of the posse. It was not until they were well out on the range that the sheriff realized that he had been duped.

Nelson had carelessly wiped his face with a bandanna and Adams' keen eyes had detected eye-holes cut in the handkerchief. The sheriff had pretended not to have seen it, but he had suggested that the posse circle to the left of the valley while he went to the right. The five men had agreed, but evidently they had decided to get the lawman, for they had suddenly started after him with their guns flaming death. Adams knew now that these five were the bank robbers.

Now, Adams swung around in his kak, his Colt in his right hand as a shot boomed from his pursuers. His gun roared and one of the outlaws slid out of the saddle.

Tom Adams

"Four to one is still right big odds," murmured Adams.

He had reached the foothills and whirled his mount among a cluster of large boulders. Bullets spattered against the rock as horse and rider vanished from sight. Adams rode back until he reached a spot that was sheltered on three sides by the huge rocks. Here he swiftly dismounted and snatched his Winchester from the saddle scabbard.

Tom Adams Traps a Band of Lawless Hombres!

With the rifle in his hands, he crept cautiously back until he reached a position where he could peer out from around the edge of a boulder. The four outlaws had dismounted, were now approaching on foot. Adams fired as he caught a glimpse of a fleeting figure edging around a boulder. The outlaw ducked back out of sight, unhit.

Adams leaped back hastily as a bullet bit a chip from the rock not far from his face. He decided to be more careful. The fact that the bandits had made no attempt to shoot him when he had met them in town still puzzled him. But it finally dawned on him that five men forming the sheriff's posse would never be suspected of being the bank robbers by the citizens of Gunsmoke.

"They were right smart, at that," murmured Adams. "Mighta got away with it if I hadn't seen that bandanna o' Nelson's."

As another fusillade sounded from his foes, Tom Adams realized that he was in a tough spot. For the moment he was protected by the boulders, but it was four against one and he could not keep up the battle indefinitely.

He whirled as he heard a slight sound behind him. It was one of the outlaws and his gun was aimed at the sheriff's heart! Adams fired a shade ahead of the outlaw. The man shuddered, swayed, and then pitched forward on his face. The outlaw's bullet had swung the sheriff halfway around, as it thudded into his shoulder.

Adams groaned in pain, and for an instant everything went black before his eyes. But he held on to consciousness. He turned slowly, peering through a red haze. He looked at the dead man, and as he did so, a plan began to formulate in his mind. Weakly he staggered over to the body, slowly and painfully lifting it until the outlaw was standing upright. The bandit's checkered shirt and his black Stetson would identify him to his companions.

Adams was sure of that.

SLOWLY the sheriff edged the body along the boulder, pulling the brim of the man's hat down so that the bullet hole in his forehead could not be seen from a distance. Adams' shoulder burned, but he found that he could use his right arm. He had put the rifle down when he had lifted the body.

He managed to move the dead man out where he could be seen by the other outlaws. It took all of his strength to hold the body there, but he managed to do it.

"Hey, Nelson!" he yelled hoarsely, trying to simulate the voice of the dead man. "I got him! The sheriff's dead!"

There was a shout from one of the three bandits as they saw the man standing there. The three men came running toward the boulders, with Nelson in the lead. As they drew closer, Adams suddenly dropped the body and clawed for the .45 in his holster. It came out flaming and Nelson dropped, a bullet in his heart. The other two men were reaching for their guns, but the sheriff's weapon was still roaring death.

A third man went down, writhing in pain. The last bandit got his gun out, sent a shot tearing through Adams' sleeve. It was the last shot the outlaw ever fired.

"First time I ever heard of a sheriff havin' an outlaw posse or a dead deputy workin' for him," murmured Adams weakly. "But yuh shore learn something every day!"

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(Continued from page 95)

"There's the castle," called out the Masked Rider as the huge stone structure loomed ahead of them. "The first thing we've got to figger is a way to get in. I see the drawbridge is up."

He realized that unless they could get inside the castle quickly men with rifles stationed at the windows could defend the place for some time. His keen brain was working busily, seeking some solution to this problem as he led the men closer.

"Careful!" he shouted. "Don't ride into rifle range until we decide how we are going to make the attack."

The sheriff held up his hand in a signal to the men behind him to halt as he heard the Masked Rider's words. They could all see the black-clad horseman was right. Page, Sutton and Dabney rode forward to discuss the situation.

THE young lawman produced a pair of field glasses from his saddle pouch and studied the castle through them.

"Men are stationed at the windows with rifles," reported Field. "We'll never be able to get near that drawbridge. Besides, it looks like it's impossible to lower that bridge except from the inside."

"Those smoke signals the sidewinders in my outfit were sending," said Les Dabney to the Masked Rider. "The men in the castle must have received a warning that we were coming."

"Looks that way," admitted the Masked Rider. He was studying the tall trees that had been planted all around on all sides of the castle just beyond the moat. "There's one way we can get in, but we'll have to wait until night to do it."

"How?" demanded the sheriff as he lowered the glasses, and looked at the man in the black mask. "Seems to me dynamite's the only answer."

"Give me full charge of these men and I'll show yuh," said the Masked Rider. He glanced at the sheriff and the ranchers. "And that means that all of yuh take yore orders from me from now on."

"Fair enough!" said Sheriff Field, and the cattlemen nodded. The young lawman raised his voice. "Listen, men, the Masked Rider is gonna be in command from now on and we want all of yuh to do as he says without argument."

A shout of agreement came from the men as they heard the sheriff's words. They all had confidence in the black-clad man who had battled for and with them so valiantly.

"All right then," called out the Masked Rider. "I want three or four of yuh to ride back to Gold Strike as quickly as yuh can. Load a wagon with axes and cross-cut saws and head back this way, pronto. Yuh should be able to return by dark if yuh move fast."

"Axes and cross-cut saws!" exclaimed Les Dabney. "What the devil do yuh want with them?"

"Show yuh when I get them," said the Masked Rider. "Who'll go?"

"I will, for one," said Ed Kimball. The old stage driver grinned. "I'll load that stuff on the Overland and bring it out here a heap quicker than it would get here in any old wagon."

"I'll go with yuh, Ed," said Sam Judson. "Good thing that we ain't making the run today. There's a stage and hosses in town."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Kimball as two other men joined them and they rode away. "That's the longest speech I ever heard you make, Sam. Yuh shore said a heap of words for you."

"Enough!" snapped the express guard, and urged his horse into a gallop as they rode back across the desert.

At the big pile that was the home of the queer Dyke Tyler the waiting men looked to their new leader for orders.

"Surround the castle!" commanded

[*Turn page*]

MECHANICS

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the Masked Rider. "All you men with rifles find good places and see if yuh can't keep them hombres at the windows busy."

The men spread out and soon the castle was surrounded on all sides. Those who had rifles and carbines took their positions behind rocks and trees and began sniping at the men at the windows of the castle. The Ghosts of Doom returned the fire with vicious interest. A state of seige became obvious.

The afternoon passed slowly and without casualties on either side. Finally the sun sank behind the mountains to the westward and night descended over the desert country. With the darkness the attackers surrounding the castle crept closer, constantly on the alert for any attempt by the trapped Ghosts of Doom to break out of the huge place.

At last the stage rumbled up out of the night, pulled by a four-horse team. The Masked Rider and Kimball and Judson briskly handed out axes and cross-cut saws.

"Get to work on those trees that are close to the moat," commanded the black-clad horseman. "Cut them down so that they fall against the castle!"

Exclamations of delight rose from the men as they comprehended his plan. Once the trees had fallen against the castle walls it would be easy to reach the windows by climbing up through their branches.

"You shore got brains!" exclaimed Reece Sutton. "Come on, men!"

CHAPTER XIX

Ghost Doom

SOME of the men worked like beavers cutting and sawing the trees, while others protected them by firing steadily at the nearest of the castle windows with their rifles. A tree fell with a crash, its topmost branches landing against the

castle wall to remain wedged there solidly by its own weight. One after another the trees began crashing against the castle, shaking even that great bulk by their weight.

The Masked Rider was the first to swing himself upward, climbing from branch to branch of a tree as he led the charge. He reached the nearest window just as the man stationed there saw him. The Masked Rider snatched out one of his guns and fired. The man at the window pitched forward and then went hurtling out into space, to land in the water of the moat below.

"Made it," panted the Masked Rider as he climbed in through the window. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw there were other men following him in climbing up the trees. He found there had only been one of the Ghosts of Doom in the room he had entered, but he heard someone running along the corridor of the second floor of the castle toward this chamber.

He stepped to the door, his guns in his hands. It was the bearded little old prospector who approached.

"All right, yuh coyote!" snapped the Masked Rider, covering the bearded man with his guns. "Lift yore hands high!"

"A horse, my kingdom for a horse," shouted the prospector. "I would flee." The scent of liquor was strong on him. He was more than half-drunk.

"Wait a minute." The Masked Rider dropped one gun back into the holster and handed the bearded man a pencil and paper. "Sign this and mebbe I'll let yuh go."

"With pleasure." The bearded man took the pencil and paper in alacrity and wrote, holding the paper against the wall of the corridor to do so. "There you are."

The Masked Rider took the paper and looked at it. "Dyke Tyler" had been written on it in a fancy hand.

"That's all I wanted to know, yuh little sidewinder," snarled the Masked

[*Turn page*]

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Rider. "You ain't Dyke Tyler—he can't read or write. The first time I saw him I asked him if he had read about Robin Hood and he told me he couldn't read. Then when you took his place down in the cellar last night and tried to get me out of the castle by actin' crazy, yuh overplayed yore part."

"I'm sure that is impossible," said the bearded man in drunken dignity. "I never over-act. What do you mean?"

"You wanted to make the character of Dyke Tyler convincing, so you said you wished that Neil Ramsey wouldn't bother you as he could sign a paper with an 'x' as well as you could. Later I knew there was something wrong about yuh when I learned yuh spout Shakespeare whenever yuh get drunk. The real Dyke Tyler wasn't likely to do that. He hadn't enough education. Yuh're an actor who has been impersonating Tyler!"

"All right, I see you have not been deceived," admitted the bearded man. "But you must admit that the way I have played my role is a masterpiece of acting. Never have I given more to a part. He did not pay me well enough for such an artistic job."

A door along the hall opened silently, and the light gleamed on the long barrel of a Colt. Neither the Masked Rider or the old actor saw it.

"Who paid yuh?" demanded the Masked Rider.

"It was—"

THE Colt in the far doorway roared, and the gray-bearded man broke off abruptly as a bullet thudded into his back. For a moment he stood there swaying as the Masked Rider leaped around him to fire a shot at the door as it slammed shut.

"Curtain call," muttered the old actor. "My last bow. How the applause roars in my ears like the sound of surf." He coughed, choked on a rush of blood, and pitched, lifeless, on the floor of the corridor.

The Masked Rider waited tensely, guns ready in his hands as the assas-

sin's door that had just closed now slowly opened. Leland Blunt stepped out, his hands raised high above his head. Behind him came Les Dabney, and the big rancher had his gun pressed against the Easterner's back.

"Heard a shot, and Blunt ducked in there just as I climbed in through the window," explained the owner of the Bar D. "He's the leader of the Ghosts of Doom."

"He's lying," said Blunt calmly. "I was tied up in there as a prisoner. Dabney climbed in through the window. He heard voices in the corridor and went to the door where he drew his gun and fired a shot. Then he ducked back and closed the door."

"Blunt is the one who's lyin'," snapped Dabney. "He fired the shot that killed DeWitt Marshall."

"So the actor's name was DeWitt Marshall," said the Masked Rider. "There ain't but one man who knew that. He's the man who hired him—the man who is the real leader of the Ghosts of Doom! And he probably has a horseshoe branded on his arm like all the rest of his men!"

Both Blunt and Dabney had the sleeves of their shirts rolled up, and the rancher now stepped to one side. He was holding his gun in his right hand as he lifted his sleeve with his left hand.

"Like this?" he asked, showing a horseshoe brand on his right arm. At the same instant his gun roared, and the Masked Rider felt the bullet sear his cheek as he ducked his head.

His own guns were roaring and bucking in his hands. Bullets tore into the big owner of the Bar D, and yet the man stood there like a statue of stone for an instant. Finally he crumpled to fall to the floor like a great log.

"Phew!" Leland Blunt mopped the cold sweat from his brow with a handkerchief. He had stood unarmed where a stray bullet might easily have hit him. "You people around this part of the country are so impetuous. The next time the Southwestern Railroad

[*Turn page*]

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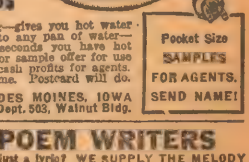

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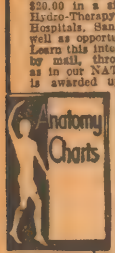

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orders me to do some investigating, I'll pick a place where it's safer."

"Railroad detective, eh?" said the Masked Rider with a grin. "Guess yuh would have been right interested if yuh'd known that feller Morgan claimed he was working for the railroad, too."

"He was—in a way," said Blunt. "He helped me more than he knew. I was sorry to hear that he had been killed."

"How did you happen to be here?" asked the Masked Rider.

Guns were roaring all over the castle, and he knew that the cattlemen and the sheriff's posse had managed to get inside and were battling the Ghosts of Doom.

"Warren Hickey and I joined a bunch of men who rode in here last night," said Blunt. "We thought we were getting away with it. We found there is a vast cellar under the castle where they keep all the stuff that was stolen—freight wagons fully loaded, even some cattle. But the Ghosts of Doom discovered us. I was a prisoner in that room there."

"I know," said the Masked Rider. "I knew yuh were tellin' the truth and Dabney was lyin' when I seen yuh wasn't even wearin' a gun-belt. Also, there are red marks on yore wrists, showin' they have been tied."

"DeWitt Marshall!" exclaimed Blunt, looking at the corpse of the bearded man. "An actor, eh? That explains part of the puzzle to me. I thought all the time he was really Dyke Tyler."

FOOTSTEPS sounded beyond them.

"No," said the Masked Rider as he saw two men coming along the corridor toward them. One was the real old prospector and the other was Tom Malory. "But that is," he said, nodding toward the approaching men. "Hi, Tom. I see yuh found him."

"Shore did," said the big redhead. "They had Dyke locked up again. It's shore a relief to find the boss is the same honest jasper he always was."

"And not a drunken pal of Will Shakespeare's?" asked the Masked Rider, with a smile.

"Shakespeare?" said Dyke Tyler indignantly. "Never heard of the gent." He glared at the still form of Les Dabney. "There he is," he gritted. "Pretending all the time to be my friend. Knowing I liked and trusted him. I even drew up a will, leaving him all of my money if anything happened to me."

"But Dabney was greedy," added the Masked Rider. "He didn't want to kill yuh, or even have anyone do it. That way he might be suspected. But he wanted yore gold mine and what money yuh had left him in yore will. So he figgered out what he thought was a smart plan. He gathered up this band of gunslicks that he called the Ghosts of Doom. He had everyone of them branded with a horseshoe so they couldn't betray him without implicatin' themselves. They were willin' to work for him because he was paying them well and let them keep the loot they got from their raidin'."

"That's right," said the old prospector. "Yuh're shore tellin' it true. I knew I could trust the Masked Rider. Shore wish I'd stayed with yuh when you let me out of that storeroom down in the mine, but I went to get my gun—had one hidden along the passageway—and they caught me and knocked me out, and that feller made up to look like me took my place."

"Dabney tried to force yuh to let the hooded men take over the castle, and I judge yuh refused," went on the Masked Rider.

"I did," said Tyler. "So they kept me locked up out of sight. I got away last night and was talkin' to Alex Page's little boy, but they caught me again before I could tell Sonny a message for his daddy."

"And all the time they were keeping him prisoner I was trying to find out what was wrong with him," said Tom Malory. "I knew Dyke wasn't

[*Turn page*]

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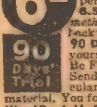

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actin' like he was in his right senses. When them hooded jaspers took over the castle and Dyke told me to work with them I was shore he had gone plumb loco, but I did what he told me. I was trying to stay around so that I could protect the boss. I'm glad to know it wasn't Dyke, but this other hombre who ordered me to drygulch the Masked Rider."

"That must have been more of Dabney's orders," said the Masked Rider. "He did his own drygulching of Slats Liddell. He wanted everyone to believe that Dyke Tyler was the leader of the Ghosts of Doom. That way when the ranchers around here finally caught Dyke, they would probably lynch him, for he would be unable to clear himself. That's what Dabney wanted. With Tyler legally dead he would inherit everything here and there would be no reason to suspect him."

"That's right," said Dyke Tyler. "That's just the way he figgered it."

"It was Dabney who drygulched Neil Ramsey," said the Masked Rider. "He was the big man on the bay hoss that yuh seen riding away, Blunt. When I went to the Bar D today one of Dabney's men asked him if he wanted a fresh hoss, said he had ridden one ragged. I figgered he must have ridden fast to get back to his ranch after killin' Ramsey."

"How did you happen to suspect Dabney?" asked Leland Blunt.

The gradually growing crowd of listeners fell silent to hear the answer to this.

"Reckon I first suspected him when I run across him driving a trail herd across the desert," said the Masked Rider. "He had a big silver watch that flashed brightly in the sunlight and could have been used for signaling. Then when a bunch of the Ghosts of Doom rode up close enough to see it was the Bar D outfit, and then rode away again without putting up a fight, I knew there was something wrong. And there was a white-faced longhorn leading that herd. Today and yesterday I seen that same steer back on the

grazing grounds of the Bar D."

"Then the trail herd was just a blind," said the railroad detective. "No one would take one certain steer to the railroad and then bring it back again."

"Right," said the Masked Rider. "Why did Neil Ramsey act so scared when he seen yuh just after the dry-gulcher got him out in the canyon?"

"Ramsey was afraid of me because he suspected that I had found him out," said Blunt quietly.

"He's dead now," said the Masked Rider. "Les Dabney finished that job on the boy today. Sneaked up to the Box S and shot Ramsey again. I promised Norma Sutton that I wouldn't tell anyone that Ramsey had been crooked."

"Then of course we won't, either," promised Blunt.

"Reckon it's all over," said the Masked Rider. "I'll be seein' you hombres again maybe. So long. I've got to be trailin'."

The guns had ceased roaring in the castle as the cattlemen had won the victory. The black-clad man made his way down the marble staircase. Dyke Tyler looked after him.

"I'm gonna change my will," said the old prospector, "and leave everything to the Masked Rider when I die."

"He deserves it," said Leland Blunt softly. "There goes a man!"

"That's shore true," Tom Malory said. "And he's a fighting fool."

The Masked Rider passed through the courtyard, crossed the lowered drawbridge and stepped out into the shadows. The form of the faithful Yaqui suddenly appeared.

"We go now?" asked Blue Hawk. "Horses are waiting, Senor. Blue Hawk brings them all close here when I see you come riding to castle with all those men." He handed the Masked Rider his black sombrero. "Fish this out of water of moat when nobody looking last night. You need it. You find out who masked man was who came to jail."

"Thanks, Hawk," said the Masked

[*Turn page*]

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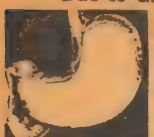

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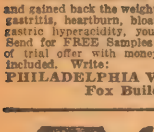

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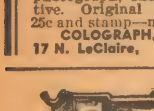

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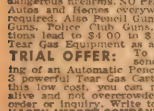

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Rider as he put on his hat and then led the way through the shadows to their horses. "Yes, we'll go now. Me, I'm kinda tired of the desert. Tomorrow we'll find new country. Our jail visitor? Yes, it was Les Dabney. That jasper shore got around a lot."

"He will rest now," said the Yaqui.

Then they had disappeared into the darkness. A moment later the sound of their horses' hoofs faded into the distance. The night had now grown silent and peaceful in the desert.

NEXT ISSUE'S NOVEL

FLAMING RIVER

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 15)

action instantly. It was the shotgun messengers who sat beside the driver of the stage coach, peered into the darkness, or tried to see around a bend in the road to see if there were bandits in hiding waiting to pounce upon the driver and occupants of the stage coach, which often carried large sums of money or shipments of gold or silver bullion.

Often passengers coming West on stage coaches carried large sums of money, and those who followed the vocation of robbing stages had a way of finding out when rich hauls could be made by holding up a stage. Then too with the reputation of most shotgun messengers, bandits were averse to taking any chances with these fast-shooting experts and considered the safest procedure to be to get the messenger first.

The First Target

Usually when the bullet-riddled body of a shotgun messenger toppled from a stage the balance of the occupants were subdued by the sight and offered no resistance, so one can well imagine how one of these messengers felt, when, as he rode mile after mile with a gun across his lap, he was fully aware that right around the next bend in the road, or as the stage passed the next big boulder or clump of trees, lead might begin flying from outlaw guns with himself sure to be the first and principal target.

Even this exciting life became monotonous to Wyatt Earp and in looking around for more excitement he found that the proprietors of the famous Oriental Gambling House had incurred the enmity of a number of people already tough or capable of getting tough on short notice, and they, thinking it would make things more safe in the Oriental to have a deputy U. S. Marshal interested and around, sold Earp an interest in the place.

Wyatt, who was doing well in Arizona, making money and not having lost a gun battle, was followed West by four brothers —Virgil Earp became city marshal of Tombstone while two of the brothers Jim and Morgan worked with Wyatt in the Oriental.

About that time a stage was held up near Tombstone and the messenger killed, then when one of the passengers resisted donating his cash to the fund being collected by the outlaws, he was killed without ceremony.

Virgil and Wyatt Earp took up the trail of the outlaws and followed them for more than two weeks, the outlaws having considerably the better of the chase on account of the citizens in the country through which they were trailed being more friendly to the outlaws than the officers, furnishing the outlaws with fresh horses and refusing to do the same for the officers. After a long journey, a hard-ridden one in which they were often without food or water, the bandit hunters returned.

Wyatt Earp, however, was determined to run down this particular gang who had killed the two men during the stage robbery, and as there was a six-thousand-dollar reward for the apprehension of the bandits he went to Ike Clanton, who was a kind of leader of a band of rustlers, and offered him the reward if he would lead him to the bandits or lead the bandits to Earp.

Clanton, knowing the deadly accuracy of Earps guns, refused unless Wyatt made the reward payable, dead or alive, and when this demand was met, Ike sent one of his lieutenants out to lead the gang, under some pretext or another, to some point near Tombstone. Clanton was then to notify Wyatt so that he could go out and capture them.

In the meantime another officer, sensing that Earp was using Clanton to get a line on the outlaws and desiring to get his hand in on the reward, one day when Clanton was drunk tried to pump him on the matter, to the extent that Clanton thought that Earp had told the other officer about their deal.

Squealers Must Die!

Getting still drunker, Clanton accused Earp of divulging their secrets, and with all the talk that followed Clanton came to the conclusion that the only way for him to continue to live and enjoy life was to kill Wyatt, because the unwritten law of the underworld was then the same as it is now, squealers must die. Clanton knew that the men who had so wantonly killed the two in the stagecoach robbery would not hesitate to kill him if they were ever convinced that he had squealed on them.

The Earps, Wyatt and Virgil, were informed the next morning after the argument between Clanton and Wyatt, that Clanton was armed and looking for them with the intention of ending their careers.

Both Wyatt and Virgil started looking for Clanton, but each went in a different direction. Virgil came upon him first, and demanded that he submit to arrest, and as Clanton prepared to shoot, Virgil knocked the gun from his hand, and proceeded with the arrest. As the only charge he could

[*Turn Page*]

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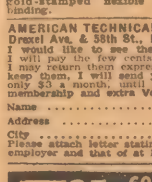

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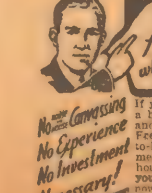

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rightfully make was "disturbing the peace" Clanton paid a twenty-five dollar fine and walked out of court, with the avowed purpose of getting his own gang together and killing all the Earps.

In those days when men were out to kill they were bold enough to send word to their victims, so the Earps received the word and the meeting took place at the O.K. Corral and be it said to the credit of the outlaws, the reputation of Wyatt Earp or even Doc Holliday, who has often been called the fastest gunman the West ever knew, seemed not to frighten them in the least. It was a showdown between real gunmen, and two of the outlaws, Frank McLowery and Billy Clanton, after being wounded during the last half of the battle, were sitting unattended in the middle of the street, still pumping lead from their guns.

Calm Fighters

Another happening in that hectic minute of gunfire shows the calmness of men of this type. When Morgan Earp was wounded, the bullet plowing through his shoulder, he said to his brother Wyatt, "They got me." The reply was, "Then get behind me and keep quiet." But Morgan did not get behind anyone, and continued firing until his revolver was empty.

Old-timers around Tombstone like to tell the story of the battle at the O.K. Corral, and although he was an outlaw they give credit to Frank McLowery, who after being wounded and sitting on the ground continuing to fire his six-gun, staggered to his feet and came face to face at close range with the famous Doc Holliday.

The Doc, although wounded in the hip, was still fanning the hammer of his gun. Frank said: "I've got you now, Doc," and Doc replied, "Well, you are a good one if you have!" Doc was quicker and more accurate and McLowery went the same way as many others who faced the gunfire of the famous Doc Holliday.

After the battle at the O.K. Corral, Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday were arrested by the sheriff and charged with the murder of Tom and Frank McLowery and Billy Clanton. Virgil and Morgan Earp were too badly wounded to be taken into custody. They were acquitted at a preliminary trial, then later rearrested on another warrant charging the same offense.

A regular feud developed, a change of venue, and it was said that there was a plot to murder the Earps and Doc Holliday as they were being taken to trial but many friends went along as guards preventing such a plot from being executed.

Either members of the Clanton gang or friends of the outlaws shot through a window of a pool room and killed Morgan Earp while he was engaged in a game of pool about four months after the battle.

Quick Revenge

As the other brothers of Morgan were enroute to California with the remains, they ran into Frank Stillwell, who was supposed to be the one who assassinated Morgan. He was fired upon by all of them and killed instantly.

Although Wyatt Earp was a deputy U. S. Marshal and seemed to be discharging the duties of his office, the sheriff of Cochise County did not like him and often threatened to arrest Earp. Finally Wyatt sent the sheriff word to make the arrest if he thought himself capable.

With two factions in the section, one against Earp and the other for him, and the outlook for a wholesale battle very promising, friends of Wyatt Earp persuaded him to leave Arizona. He went to Colorado where the same sheriff of Cochise County, Arizona, tried to have him extradited, but to no avail. Earp then moved to California where he settled down to a normal life.

Old-timers of Arizona will regale you for hours with stories of the early-day battles and gunmen of that section, and they will always tell about Wyatt Earp, famous fearless peace officer, who seemingly did a lot of disrupting the peace of many men of that time, a man who was shot at more and hit fewer times than perhaps any other gunman who lived through the tumultuous times of Arizona territorial days.

Well, waddies, we have come to another trail end, so until I am privileged to take another jaunt with you I'll be sayin'—*Adios.*

—FOG HORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

FOLKS, we've moved to new range—the address of this magazine has changed to 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. I'm telling you this pronto so you can swamp us with your letters and postcards here at the new office. We're grateful to each and every one for opinions, comments and suggestions regarding MASKED RIDER WESTERN. Keep them streaming in.

Next issue will feature FLAMING RIVER—another quick-trigger novel of The Masked Rider by Donald Bayne Hobart. It's a grand humdinger of a yarn—and brings you the colorful argosy of those old boats that sailed the Arkansas River. There's action aplenty on deck—and more than that on the shores of the river! A great range story—with many unexpected surprises from the first page to the last. The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk are seen at their best in FLAMING RIVER—so be on hand to enjoy it.

There will be other wallopin' yarns next issue, plus another fine chat with Fog Horn. See you then. Thanks—and *Hola!*

—THE EDITOR.

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28x5.50-18	2.75	1.15
29x5.50-19	2.75	1.15
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